

Marion Campbell

*Alexander III – King of Scots*

House of Lochar, Isle of Colonsay, Argyll, 1999.  
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It is a difficult task writing the biography of a 13th century monarch, a figure for whom not even a likeness exists. Marion Campbell bravely attempts this task with what she herself calls monstrous impertinence.

Alexander III was one of the greatest of Scotland's pre-War of Independence monarchs. However, most Scots remember him, if at all, as the impatient king who braved winter storms in a vain attempt to reach his young, nubile queen, one dark night long ago. Miss Campbell, in this curious curate's egg of a book, attempts to bring the king out of this historic haar and uncover the man behind the myth.

Is she successful? Not completely, but she has produced a book full of fascinating detail. She evokes the colours and flavour of the age, of a multi-lingual, multi-cultural Scotland. We learn useful facts such as the length of a league, the value of a merk, the job description of the King's Marischal and how to clean your mail coat. If we should partake too enthusiastically of the gariofilatum or clove-scented wine, we discover that amethyst averts drunkenness! Indeed, we learn a great deal about the times in which Alexander lived and the Scotland that he ruled. Miss Campbell places Scotland within the familial, political network of 13th century Europe. She describes how Scotland was affected by its links with other

countries and by influences coming from destinations as far apart as Castille, Rome and Sicily. Inevitably, relations between Scotland and Norway and England take up a considerable portion of the book. She includes a valuable survey of Henry III's reign and his interests in Scotland.

However, fascinating though the detail is, it sometimes causes a little irritation. The book now and again seems to lose concentration and meanders off, leaving Alexander far behind. For example, there is a long detour into the crusading period, despite the fact that Alexander never went on crusade. Indeed, unlike other Scots, such as the Earl of Atholl who died in Tunis with King Louis, he doesn't seem to have been particularly interested in doing so.

The main problem is that the work is not an academic treatise, nor is it really a biography, Alexander does not appear much in the first half of the book, and we learn more of the motivations of Henry and Edward than those of good king Alexander. The title is a slight misnomer and ought to be changed to *\*The Life and Times of Alexander*, or *\*Scotland in the 13th Century*.

Occasionally, the work also reads like a historical novel, when Miss Campbell imagines what a certain character might be thinking. Initially, I felt this sat awkwardly with the academic pretension of the notes. However, when she stopped including so much narrative in the latter portion of the book, I missed it!

Despite my criticisms, I found it enjoyable and I am sure the general reader will find much to appreciate.

Andrew Jennings