

REVIEWS

Norman H. Reid (ed.), *Scotland in the Reign of Alexander III*, John Donald Publishers Ltd, 1990, xiv+218pp.

Two comments may be quoted to sum up the different responses which the character and reign of Alexander III have elicited from historians over the centuries. The first is the rather tart observation of the contemporary English chronicler, Thomas Wykes, in his obituary notice of Alexander: 'of his death diverse men thought differently' in Scotland, as well as in England, one might add. Within a century or so of his death Alexander's reputation was being transformed in Scotland: he was now regarded as a true paragon of kingship, his reign was extolled as one of peace and prosperity. On his death, as Andrew Wyntoun (c. 1420) commented in a famous line, 'oure gold was changyd into lede'. The comments of Thomas Wykes and Andrew Wyntoun are, of course, separated not only by the nationality of the two authors, but also by the bitter enmity between England and Scotland which came to dominate the relationship between the two countries within ten years of Alexander III's death. It is very considerably, though not exclusively, with the benefit of hindsight and in the wake of the Wars of Independence that the reputation of Alexander III and his reign has been shaped. It is the commendable aim of the present collection of essays to attempt to look at the reign on its own terms rather than as a curtain-raiser for the momentous events after Alexander's death. It does not purport to be a biography of the king or a history of his reign; instead it sets out 'to examine some of the themes which reveal the character of the period'.

Two broad themes, fortuitously or otherwise, seem to stand out. The first concerns the character of Scottish political society and in particular of the aristocratic community in the age of Alexander III. It is an issue which has to confront a paradox: how does one square the apparent chronic factionalism of the 1250s (when the king himself, albeit a minor, was a pawn in noble disputes) with the claim that the maturity and responsibility which the aristocratic governing community revealed after 1286 were no newly-found qualities but were deeply embedded in the political texture of the kingdom? This is a paradox which Dr. Alan Young confronts boldly and successfully in an essay which should be read alongside his earlier work on Walter Comyn, earl of Menteith. He pursues the now well-established revisionist argument of 'an effective alliance between the crown and the nobility' (rather than the hostility and distrust so frequently posited in the past) and more particularly he presents the evidence for believing that the Comyns continued to dominate political society after 1260 and did so from a position of unshakeable loyalty. As so often with a revisionist argument the case seems occasionally overstated, underestimating the tensions within, and the fragility of, medieval political communities in Scotland (as elsewhere); but in general this essay greatly enhances, within the limits of the evidence, our understanding of the fabric of power and politics of Scottish society in the mid thirteenth century.

Perhaps the most famous incident of Alexander III's reign was the battle (or should it be 'skirmish?') of Largs (1263) and the subsequent Treaty of Perth (1266) between the kings of Scots and Norway. Drawing on what he terms 'the extremely tedious' Hakon's Saga Professor E.J. Cowan subjects these episodes to close scrutiny. He does well to remind us that the area embraced by the Hebrides was considered to be wealthy and that we should not dismiss the prospect of a 'self-sustaining kingdom [of the Isles]... embodying a threat to the very kingdom

of Scotland'. But the absence of maps and adequate genealogical diagrams and a tendency to overwrite (concluding with the resounding claim that 'History was to demonstrate that in acquiring the Hebrides Scotland had created her Afghanistan') somewhat reduce the effectiveness of his contribution. It is to the Scottish army – or, perhaps, armies – that Professor Geoffrey Barrow turns his attention, showing with his customary scrupulous scholarship how the body of knights and the 'common army' were being merged in Alexander III's reign and indeed earlier. The evidence may be meagre; but this essay helps us to begin to understand the resilience and determination which the Scottish army was to show after 1296.

The second set of themes in the volume revolves around Scottish society in the reign of Alexander III, probing from a variety of angles the question whether it was indeed an age of prosperity and peace. Nicholas Mayhew scours the inadequate evidence in order to assess the economic well-being of Scotland. His comments on the wool trade, the growing money supply and the increased output of the Scottish mints allow him to conclude tentatively that this may indeed have been a Silver (if not a golden) age. Richard Fawcett comes broadly to a similar conclusion from his review of ecclesiastical architecture (concentrating on the cathedrals of Glasgow, Dunblane, Elgin and Brechin); he also notes, interestingly, that the thirteenth century was the last period until the eighteenth when the architectural courses of Scotland and England ran parallel. In one of the most rewarding essays in the book Hector MacQueen is likewise concerned to investigate the similarities and parallels between English and Scots law in the thirteenth century; but the nub of his argument turns on the pre-feudal and archaic elements which he detects in Scots law by a close examination of the Berne Ms. in the Scottish Record Office. Finally, in a sadly posthumous essay Dr. Marinell Ash casts valuable light on the church in Alexander III's reign – in particular church-king relationships, the impact of factionalism on ecclesiastical appointments, the growing role of the papacy and the striking degree of ecclesiastical antiquarianism.

What overall impression then does this very worthwhile collection of essays leave of Alexander III and his reign? Our cumulative understanding of the period, especially of its political cross-currents and institutional significance, has certainly been enhanced. But equally it has to be said that many of the developments in law, the economy and church architecture can only rarely be pinpointed to the reign itself, let alone to the king. Alexander III remains rather an enigma (above all because of the character and shortcomings of the evidence). Dr. Norman Reid concedes as much in his valuable concluding essay which reviews the changing reputation of the king and shows how Alexander and his reign became a natural focus for patriotic historical writing from the fourteenth century. Even when the layers of historiographical varnish have been carefully removed, Alexander himself remains elusive. Dr. Reid pats him on the head as a 'good king' but almost immediately half retracts the compliment by dismissing his reign as 'unspectacular'. He then retorts to the grand statement – always a tell-tale sign of historical uncertainty – declaring that 'the primacy of Alexander III's reign lies in its position as a watershed of Scotland's history'.

Truth to tell, many of the questions one would like answered about the king and his reign lie beyond the resources of the evidence. Indeed, one might argue that many of the issues broached in this volume might have been more meaningfully and effectively answered by not tying them rather artificially to the coat-tails of a particular reign. Nevertheless the issues were well worth broaching and the volume of essays deepens and refines our understanding of the Scotland of the thirteenth century. Dr. Reid and his team deserve warm thanks and so does the house of

John Donald for publishing yet another most serviceable addition to its library of monographs on Scottish history.

University College of Wales, Aberystwyth

R.R. Davies.

Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, The Boydell Press, 1991 239pp., 35 ill., £19.95.

A book on women in the Viking Age *has* to be different from all other books on the Vikings for so much of the usual evidence for the Vikings is entirely to do with the world of the male – the fighting, raiding, trading heroic ethos. Yet such a book has nonetheless to cope with the daunting problem of all studies of the Viking Age, which is the breadth and variety of the source material, ranging from archaeological evidence to runic inscriptions, to historical sources from Russia, the Arabic world and Western Europe (with last but not least, the Icelandic sagas and skaldic poetry). How does Judith Jesch tackle such a daunting problem?

Admirably, it must be said. Her organisation of the material is well-ordered and coherent, her treatment of the sources such that no scholar can possibly quarrel with her interpretations, and her English is impeccable. The reader is led through the whole range of evidence, starting with the dry bones of archaeology, which one feels she starts with in order to clear the ground (ha ha) so that she can get on with the really interesting linguistic and literary evidence. Then comes the runic material, laconic, terse, difficult to interpret, ambiguous in meaning, but contemporary and about real people, their names, family relationships, personal tragedies and religious beliefs. These monuments are also a record of *purpose*, raised to commemorate sons, daughters, husbands, mothers; also raised to record inheritance and possession of landed rights as well as good works like the building of bridges in memory of the dead. A lot of women are remembered in many ways in these runic inscriptions and most of them will throw a totally new light on the Viking Age for a majority of readers. This chapter opens up a very little known source of evidence and expounds it with a deftness of touch and with a command of the evidence and an understanding of the social world lying behind the words which is the mark of a good teacher. My only criticism is the lack of an adequate map to show the reader where all these strange places are. There is only one map in the whole book and it is quite inadequate for the needs of a readership which is unlikely to be as familiar with Scandinavia as the author. Nor indeed is there any referencing system for the illustrations so that one has to find out for oneself whether a runestone is depicted or not.

Next we are given a little taste of place-names when trying to track down the female colonist – I felt that there was more that could be said on this aspect. Then we were plunged into the foreign sources – first those that refer to women at home in Scandinavia, then to the Scandinavian women in England, France, Ireland, Russia and the Arab world. Every source is carefully assessed and analysed and the author's skill in interpreting them is again very impressive – this section will prove most useful for many other reasons than merely the information about women that has been extracted from the sources. Inevitably, it is impossible to get any flowing narrative out of such disparate material, and one is left with a series of impressions of women's role in a man's world (mostly noble ones, of course) from Emma in England to Olga in Russia and the inevitable slave girl on the Volga (it would be nice if she had been called Olga too!). What a good thing that the author did not shirk this last famous and fearful description of the funeral of the Rus trader which never fails to set the reader's hair on end. It had to be gone through