

Alan R. MacDonald and Mary Verschuur, eds.

*Records of the Convention of Royal Burghs,
1555; 1631-1648*

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THE *Records of the Convention of Royal Burghs* have, until this publication, been synonymous with James Marwick's edited collection from the 19th century. While extensive, there are crucial missing years from those volumes which MacDonald and Verschuur have admirably endeavoured to fill. Trawling the repositories of the National Library of Scotland, the National Archives of Scotland and Aberdeen City Archives, the editors have successfully plugged some of the gaps, including the year 1555 and several years between 1631 and 1648. The volume is well indexed, allowing specific searches for countries, individuals and commodities and is easily comparable to the previous volumes of Marwick. The lengthy editorial conventions section also allow a simple comparison and understanding of the different records used, for example by explaining that records from Aberdeen City Archives and the National Library use folio numbers, while the records from Burntisland held at the National Archives of Scotland use page numbers. Footnotes also assist the reader by explaining uncommon words and phrases as well as providing links to other regulatory bodies where relevant.

It is almost disappointing that these 'missing' records reveal that the Convention continued as it always had done, even during the tumultuous 1640s, something that the editors themselves comment upon in the introduction. Further the lack of records from the 1640s is also slightly disenchanting and one is left cursing the survival of documentation from dozens of peaceful years while the records of the 'troubles' have yet to and may never come to light. That said, the information provided retains value; indeed, the evidence that the Convention continued as normal during these years has in a sense put paid to one of the last 'what ifs' in Convention history. While the activities

of the Scottish Parliament, General Assembly and Privy Council during these years were all well known, those of the Convention were not and the present volume does fill some of the gaps.

While the endeavours of the editors to provide new insight into the actions of the Convention are to be applauded, the introduction to the volume is not without problems. To begin with, there is confusion between the term 'factor' and the office of 'Conservator'. The editors discuss the attempts of the Convention to 'establish and oversee factors in France to monitor and facilitate Scottish trade as was the policy at Veere' (p. 21). However, as well-known scholarship by Professor Steve Murdoch et al. has shown, factors and the Conservator at Veere were different roles and not interchangeable. Factors, or as the editors correctly identify, facilitators of trade, were present all over Europe for merchants of all nationalities. They were essentially middle-men for traders. The Scottish Conservator at Veere was far more than this – he was a merchant-consul *extraordinaire*, who was permitted to adjudicate in judicial matters involving Scottish merchants. In short, the Conservator was far more powerful and influential than any ordinary factor.

Moreover, a lack of referencing is also an issue. The introduction acknowledges that Scottish merchants traded with France, Germany, England, Ireland and Scandinavia without acknowledging the majority of the scholarly work which has investigated these topics. While Siobhan Talbot's research has been acknowledged, it merely tips a nod to her thesis for historiographical purposes and does not acknowledge the serious research that she herself has undertaken in regard to Scottish privileges in France. Also missing is reference to Steve Murdoch's work on Scandinavia (2006) or France (2007) or indeed the work on similar subjects covering the Netherlands by Douglas Catterall (2002) or northwest Germany by Kathrin Zickermann (2009). One wonders why one relevant scholar is brought into view while others with equally important things to say on the subject are omitted.

These introductory issues aside, this volume, along with Marwick's, is essential to those investigating the activities of the Convention throughout its influential period of the 16th and 17th centuries. The editors are to be congratulated on completing the arduous task of locating, transcribing and editing this edition. It is the hope of this reviewer that they will be equally successful in locating similar documents relating to this important institution and that the Scottish Historical Society will be pleased to publish such findings in the future.

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