

Douglas Simpson, *Dunollie, Oban, Argyll* (Centre for Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, 1991), 118pp., £3.95 paperback.

At the time of his death in 1968, W. Douglas Simpson left a number of unpublished papers, mainly in manuscript form, which were subsequently deposited in Aberdeen University Library. The appearance in print of the contents of one of these manuscripts, twenty-four years after the death of its author, is the work of Dr. J.S. Smith of the Department of Geography and Centre for Continuing Studies at Aberdeen, and his efforts in dealing with what appears to have been a difficult text are much to be lauded. His avowed aim in publishing the manuscript is to 'fittingly remind his many admirers of Douglas Simpson's deep store of knowledge and highly developed writing skills', but one is left with the lingering question of Why? In his lifetime Simpson published a vast amount of material, a more than fitting memorial for his enormous energy and boundless enthusiasm for all aspects of history, archaeology and architecture: the appearance of a 'new' publication does little other than show how far studies in these fields have advanced since the 1960s.

There lies the chief flaw in the decision to publish Simpson's papers on Dunollie Castle (together with Gylen Castle on Kerrera and an examination of the Brooch of Lorn): it has not weathered the passage of time so well as other aspects of Simpson's work. Indeed, to read the text is as if to step into some kind of time-warp, to return to the genteel world of the 1930s and encounter again that peculiar blend of the academic paper and the travelogue. There are few scholars of history and archaeology today who would (or could) produce such a work, complete with its lengthy extracts from poetry and fictional prose. To someone reared in contemporary academic writing fashions Simpson's frequent digressions and flowery, descriptive prose form a frustrating veil which obscures in large part the still-substantial analytical and interpretative narrative which runs through his text. It is easy to lose sight of the subject of his research in among the welter of superfluous detail or data which enshrouds it.

While it is clear that architectural-historical research has moved on considerably from the time that Simpson penned his manuscript the book is difficult to dismiss simply as a piece of dated scholarship. It is gratifying, for example, to note now with the benefit of hindsight and advanced knowledge (in the shape of Leslie Alcock's excavations at Dunollie) that Simpson's interpretation of the physical layout of the Dark Age fortification and its medieval successor was largely correct, although his dating of the surviving structure has not been borne out by the much more detailed analysis of the castle undertaken in the 1980s by the Royal Commission. But any such positive factors are overwhelmed by the availability of a much more detailed analysis of the site in the Commission's Argyll inventories, which brings all the information and interpretation together in one place. Furthermore, the value of Simpson's comments on the layout, and indeed of his comments on the physical appearance of all the structures or objects discussed in his text, is severely curtailed by the total absence of location maps, site plans or illustrations. Of more value, perhaps, is the historical information concerning the MacDougalls, which sets out in (for Simpson!) fairly concise terms, the fluctuating fortunes of this fascinating family.

Perhaps the greatest value in the book lies in the complete bibliography of Simpson's publications which precedes the Oban text. Compiled by A.T. Hall, former Acting Librarian at

Aberdeen University, it brings together for the first time Simpson's full repertoire of published work and, as an appendix, the unpublished material on deposit in Aberdeen University Library. This bibliography in itself shows that the man needed no greater memorial than that which he had built for himself in his lifetime.

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