

## REVIEWS

**Lloyd and Jenny Laing, *The Picts and the Scots* (Alan Sutton, 1993), 172 pp., 136 half-tone and line figures, 14 colour plates, £16.99.**

Over the last ten years there has been a major upswing of interest in the Picts at both a popular and an academic level. The air of mystery and obscurity which surrounded them has largely been swept away by a wide range of publications aimed at almost every sector of the lay and academic community; by conferences which seek to underscore how much we do know rather than how little; and by the development of the Pictish Art Society as a credible forum for discussion of matters Pictish. All this has gone a long way towards de-mythologising the Picts and presenting them in their true context amongst the distinctive cultures of early medieval Europe. Where a 'problem of the Picts' remains, it is a problem of lack of continuing fieldwork rather than lack of sufficient information.

By way of contrast, the Picts' neighbours and eventual 'conquerors', the Scots, are a people who continue to present many problems. Study of the Scots has focused primarily on historical sources and most modern publications have tended towards the heavy-weight and academic. Yet, like the Picts, the problem is more apparent than real, for excavations at key sites such as Dunadd, Dunollie and Iona have provided a wealth of information about their material culture and daily life. It is all, however, a question of presentation, much being locked beyond reach of an interested lay public in the pages of academic texts and excavation reports.

What is most striking about studies in early medieval Scottish history and archaeology is that in recent years there has been a tendency to focus on specific areas or themes rather than attempt to provide the overview. The result has been, with few exceptions, that research has tended to move down exclusively 'Pictish' or 'Scottish' avenues, a development which must rank as one of the most counter-productive in the whole field of early medieval studies. When it is borne in mind that it was the fusion of Pictish and Scottish cultures that formed the basis of the medieval kingdom of the Scots, the failure to look at both peoples conjointly seems all the more ludicrous. Lloyd and Jenny Laing are therefore to be congratulated for not only drawing both lines together, but for presenting much that has hitherto been beyond the reach of a general readership in a single volume in an accessible and highly readable style.

Divided into four main sections, *The Picts and the Scots* begins with two chapters which largely focus on setting out the separate histories of both peoples into comprehensible narratives, but introducing other important areas such as the thorny question of the Pictish language and the issue of religion. The matter of Pictish paganism is perhaps treated too shallowly, despite the acknowledgement of Kathleen Hughes' arguments that Christianity was not well established until the early eighth century, and their comments on the finds from Covesea in Moray (p. 23) have been superseded by yet more recent work. The chapter on the Scots is an especially valuable contribution as it takes them back into their historical Irish homeland. By looking at the culture from which they sprang, the development of the Scottish kingdom of Dalriada becomes more readily understandable. The migration of the Scots from Ulster, moreover, is no longer treated in isolation but presented as part of a broader movement of peoples in sub-Roman Britain. Due to the nature of our surviving documentary sources and past academic tradition of research into the Church, there is perhaps an over-emphasis on Iona, Columba and the Celtic Church, and this section is left hanging in the air without any real conclusions as to its significance.

Chapters 3 and 4 move from historical issues to deal with cultural matters, looking first at the 'Everyday Life of the Picts and the Scots' and then at the 'Art of the Picts and the Scots'. Here,

again, there is a blend of archaeological and historical study, pulling together information from disparate sources to produce a composite whole. Except in comments about Celtic society in general, it must be borne in mind that what is reconstructed for Pictish society is based on analogy from Scottish sources or from the writings of Bede and other non-Pictish scholars and observers. Despite this handicap, what has been produced is a highly credible image.

The 'Art of the Picts and Scots' is the largest but least successful section. Clearly, this is the field which is of greatest personal interest to the authors, but with 48 pages devoted to the Picts and 12 to the Scots there is a striking imbalance. Indeed, the section on Dalriada seems almost an afterthought tagged on to the end of a detailed essay on the evolution of Pictish art.

Praise for the book has to be tempered with complaints about its editing and the quality of some of its maps. There are, for example, distressing signs that the authors' knowledge of Scottish geography is not quite what it should be, Fig. 7, for example (map of Historical Pictland) locating Restenneth somewhere in the vicinity of Glen Shee! The errors are most noticeable in the captions to the illustrations: the Raasay Stone (Fig. 96) is on Raasay, not Skye; there is no such stone as the Eassie 'Priory' stone; while in the text Fowlis Wester is located in Fife (p. 135) in the index as being in Angus, as well as correctly in Perthshire (p. 127). Such mistakes detract from the overall value of the book.

Apart from these minor areas of complaint, *The Picts and the Scots* is largely successful in achieving what it set out to do: present state-of-the-art academic research on these two peoples in an accessible format. There are those who will complain that the approach is too 'popular' (no footnotes, for example), but this is surely to misrepresent the purpose behind the book. In presenting what is often highly complex or contentious material in a readable, understandable fashion it must be voted a great success and its authors must be applauded for what they have achieved.

**Richard Oram**

***The Ancient Monuments of Shetland*, ed. C. Tabraham. Published for Historic Scotland by HMSO (Edinburgh, 1993), 64 pp., £3.95.**

*The Ancient Monuments of Shetland* is an attractive handbook for the tourist in Shetland who wishes to visit the eight sites cared for by Historic Scotland on behalf of the Secretary of State for Scotland: Stanydale, Clickhimin, Ness of Burgi, Mousa Broch, Jarlshof, Muness Castle, Scalloway Castle and Fort Charlotte. The text is by Noel Fojut and Denys Pringle who comment in very general terms about the periods to which the eight monuments belong. The chief photographer is David Henrie, with additional photographs by Mike Brooks, Noel Fojut and Denys Pringle. The illustrations are eye-catching and give the tourist a foretaste of what to expect when visiting the sites.

The writers, Fojut and Pringle, sweep through thousands of years in a limited number of pages and they are, at times, forced to lean on generalisation and over-simplification in their attempt to inform the public about such a widely divergent range of monuments. Their aim is obviously to inspire interest and enthusiasm in the reader so that he/she will wish to visit the sites described and they are, for the most part, successful. Sometimes they are dealing with periods of history and monuments about which very little is known, as in the section on the 'temple' at Stanydale and they use the sensible technique of posing questions in their text which the reader can ponder when visiting the site. The section on brochs also necessitates the posing of many questions and, in general, Fojut and Pringle point to the uncertainties of history but,