

REVIEWS

Murdo Fraser

*The Rivals: Montrose and Argyll
and the Struggle for Scotland.*

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THE RIVALS, by Murdo Fraser, traces the fates of Archibald Campbell, eighth Earl and first Marquis of Argyll, and James Graham, fifth Earl and first Marquis of Montrose, through the political manoeuvring, religious upheaval, and brutal warfare of the British Civil Wars (1638-51), and up to the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660. Fraser, a Conservative MSP, uses the figures of Argyll and Montrose to follow the general narrative of the period, providing a foot in both camps of the Civil Wars, with Argyll becoming a leader of the Covenanting Movement, and Montrose taking on the mantle of commander of Royalist forces in Scotland.

Fraser makes his objective clear in the book's introduction. He intends to 'stimulate interest in a neglected period of our history'.¹ A noble cause which every scholar of the period would welcome. The book itself is very readable, capturing the drama and intrigue of the period, whilst providing the reader with a solid general account of the Civil Wars in Scotland. For general readers and students, this monograph will provide an accessible and entertaining means through which to access a period which is still too often regarded as too complicated. The book's narrative focus should also be praised, viewing events from a Scottish perspective. All too often, studies on this period become infatuated with the developments during the 'English' Civil Wars. Fraser

1 Fraser 2015, 11.

follows the model of David Stevenson, Barry Robertson, Allan Macinnes, and Laura Stewart, placing the narrative emphasis on the Scottish story, whilst explaining the developing situations in both England and Ireland.²

However, despite the book's noteworthy contribution, it has a number of issues. Throughout the volume, there is a distinct lack of referencing.³ Fraser supplements the main narrative with interesting anecdotes and statistics, but these are almost always left unreferenced. This leaves anyone more than a casual reader increasingly sceptical of the details, especially when Fraser discusses 'popular opinion' but provides absolutely no evidence to support his assertions.⁴ In addition, there is almost no effort made to situate the author's narrative within the current historiography – apart from a few references to Allan Macinnes' recent biography of Argyll.⁵ This is most likely due to the author's desire to save his readers from the labyrinth of historiographical debate. However, Fraser often refers to SR Gardiner's rather archaic argument that the Wars allowed for the establishment of the 'middle-class' within the political sphere.⁶ At no point does Fraser mention any of the current leading scholars of the period apart from Macinnes. This would inevitably leave a non-academic audience with the view that Fraser's arguments represent current scholarly thought, which they do not.

This fact is made worse by the author's favouritism towards Argyll. Fraser seizes the opportunity to present Argyll as a forerunner of Scottish democracy, whilst portraying Montrose as a brave, but ultimately misguided lackey who too often thought with his blade rather than his brain.⁷ Indeed, at one point, Fraser refers to Montrose's campaign as a 'vainglorious adventure' which Scotland paid a high price for.⁸ Fraser's pro-Campbell inclination is seen throughout his criticism of the 'savage Highlanders and Irish' within Montrose's army.⁹ Whilst Fraser often states that neither side was innocent of crimes during the Wars, there is a strange sense that the author believes the Covenanting (particularly Campbell) forces were more innocent than the Royalists. Whether this was intentional or not, it has two negative effects. Firstly, it reinforces the stereotype of the savage and uncivilised Highlander and Gael which still plagues the historical narrative. Secondly, it portrays the

2 Macinnes 1996; Robertson 2014; Stevenson 2003a; 2003b; Stewart 2016.

3 Fraser 2015, 15, 18, 27, 46, 65, 67, 132, 142, 145, 187.

4 *Ibid.*, 185, 196, 223.

5 Macinnes 2011.

6 Fraser 2015, 79, 103, 245; Gardiner 1889.

7 Fraser 2015, 7-8, 26-27, 79, 86, 104, 138, 236, 245.

8 *Ibid.*, 165.

9 *Ibid.*, 17-19, 131.

Campbells as the aggrieved party, which is both dangerous and inaccurate. There were no innocent parties during the Civil Wars.

Fraser also misses his opportunity to contextualise the conflict in Scotland within a wider European context (especially that of the Thirty Years War). Whilst his focus on the Scottish situation is praiseworthy, it loses some of its value since the author focuses almost entirely on what is happening within the British Isles. Even when the narrative goes abroad – most notably when Montrose travels around Europe seeking out support for the Royalist cause – Fraser rushes through this part of the story, failing to explain the delegating and negotiating conducted by both factions to gain international support.¹⁰ Recent research conducted by Steve Murdoch and Alexia Grosjean has highlighted the importance of Scotland's European links – particularly those with Sweden and Denmark – in the developing political situation.¹¹ Prof. Murdoch and Dr Grosjean's recent study on *Alexander Leslie and the Scottish Generals of the Thirty Years' War* (2014) has uncovered the intriguing similarities and connections which existed between Scottish Thirty Years War veterans, many of whom would find themselves on opposite sides of the conflict in Scotland.¹² Moreover, Fraser largely skims over the Scandinavian negotiations (which both rivals conducted), thereby neglecting a factor which could have – and in at least one case did – decide the outcome of the Wars.

In sum, *The Rivals* provides an accessible Scottish narrative through which readers from any background can enjoy a period of history which is too often placed to one side. Fraser does this whilst constantly keeping the reader aware of the developments in both the Covenanting and Royalist camps. However, due to the author's reliance on printed source material, the monograph fails to add anything new to the field, falling victim to old-fashioned stereotypes and generalisations, and disappointingly, makes no use of Gaelic sources. One is forced to wonder whether an active researcher of the period would have been able to produce a better-rounded and detailed account. As such, it is a pity that this book, despite being well-written, represents a missed opportunity. Thus, whilst scholars should remain sceptical of the arguments within *The Rivals*, it provides a gateway from which readers can easily access the British Civil Wars in Scotland.

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10 Murdoch 2003. Chapter 8 in this book is of particular relevance to Montrose's continental expedition.

11 Grosjean 2003; Murdoch 2001.

12 Murdoch and Grosjean 2014. Chapters 5 and 6 are of particular relevance.

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