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Neil McGuigan

*Máel Coluim III 'Canmore':
An Eleventh-Century Scottish King*

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DESPITE BEING often described as a king whose tenure marked a turning point in the kingdom of Scots, Máel Coluim III had not been the subject of a monograph. This is hardly surprising considering the scarcity of documentary records pertaining to eleventh-century Scotland. Historians also have to wrangle with the inconsistencies of surviving sources – mostly written in England and Ireland – in terms of chronology and accuracy. Neil McGuigan rose to the challenge to publish, arguably, one of the most exciting monographs in the field of medieval Scottish history to be published in the last ten years. *Máel Coluim III 'Canmore'* is more than a biographical monograph: it is an in-depth look into the intricacies of eleventh-century Scottish politics, society, culture, nobility and historiography. Beautifully written and meticulously researched, *Máel Coluim III 'Canmore'* includes seventeen chapters covering an impressive amount of information on eleventh-century Scotland and Máel Coluim's reign, encompassing the political world of Máel Coluim's predecessors; his marriages to Ingibjörg of Orkney and Margaret of Wessex; his political rivals and allies, both domestic and foreign; law, court, and nobility; and historiographical portrayals of the king after his death. The monograph is not intended for more general audiences despite the author's approachable prose style, yet for scholars of medieval Scotland, this monograph is a must-read. Neil McGuigan's encyclopaedic *Máel Coluim III* can be described succinctly with one word: exceptional.

A biography of this rigour and calibre is only possible due to McGuigan's expert and nuanced interdisciplinary approach, relying on historiography, onomastics, and political and socio-cultural histories of the kingdom and its neighbours in this period. As McGuigan warns readers in the prologue, "no central narrative is possible [...]" (p. 13) in understanding Máel Coluim's reign and the milieu in which he lived and operated. Instead, the author's approach

to his documentary sources is “[...] to isolate whatever ‘facts’ our author is able to reproduce separately from any interpretation”. (p. 13) Readers are also warned to not expect definitive, final answers on Máel Coluim’s life and reign. Instead, McGuigan asserts that, as a historian, he can present potentialities of a remote past, each with its own merits and incongruencies, to suggest some likely scenarios and their consequences. His approach to writing Máel Coluim’s biography is a wise one. Such an approach recognises the inherent difficulties in the documentary evidence used that have delayed the publication of a biography of Máel Coluim III until now.

To address the difficulties in interpreting eleventh- and twelfth-century sources, *Máel Coluim III ‘Canmore’* structures its chapters thematically and thus contextualises rather than breaks the chronological continuity of the narrative. Chapters One and Two examine the kingdom of Scots in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, with a focus on disentangling the evidence on Scottish politics in the period. Regnal succession is best characterised as a tipping of balances towards Clann Chausantín with the reign of Máel Coluim II at the exclusion of Clann Áeda from the kingship, a process of re-segmentation of royal houses, not of a new type of succession in the kingdom. The emergence of Clann Ruaidrí was in tandem with these processes, with Findláech Mac Ruaidrí and later his son Macbeth ruling this area. McGuigan explores the origins of Crínán, abbot of Dunkeld and father to Donnchad I and possibly to Máel Doraid of Bamburgh. He suggests that Crínán might have been grandfather to both Máel Coluim III and Gospatric of Bamburgh. This hypothesis contributes to the analysis of Máel Coluim’s activities in northern England in the first eight years of his reign found in Chapter Seven.

There are some provocative suggestions McGuigan derives from his evidence. These include the suggestion that it was possible for Máel Coluim to have spent time in both England *and* Orkney during his adolescence and early adulthood. Additionally, he argues that despite possibly being related to Gospatric of Bamburgh, Máel Coluim’s 1061 attack on Bamburgh-ruled Lindisfarne was influenced by his relationship with Tostig Godwineson as an oath brother and that Tostig might have supported Máel Coluim’s usurpation of the throne in 1057/8, and as a result, became his oath brother. He also suggests that Máel Coluim’s peace with King William at Abernethy in 1072 was a political win for the Scottish king and that it is possible that Edith-Matilda was one of the hostages taken to England by Duke Robert in 1080, with a promise of an English education and perhaps marriage to one of the sons of William the Conqueror.

The last chapter to deal with Máel Coluim’s reign, Chapter Eleven, provides possible reasons behind Máel Coluim’s invasions of England in

1091 and 1093, the latter of which he did not survive. McGuigan suggests that Máel Coluim's invasion in 1091 could have been either a response to Duke Robert's dispossession of Edgar Atheling's lands (as suggested by the MS E of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) or the cause of it (as suggested by the *Chronicon ex chronicis*); perhaps it was an act of political opportunism. Chapter Twelve examines Máel Coluim's last year as king, 1093, when Máel Coluim and Margaret took a peaceful expedition to meet William Rufus in Gloucester, with a stop in Durham and Wilton Abbey to visit their daughter, Edith-Matilda. McGuigan hypothesises that Máel Coluim's death was more likely to have been at Alnmouth and not Alnwick, as commonly believed, due to the town's name being used in the sources, the pre-Norman importance of Alnmouth, and the pattern of Scottish retreat after the king's death.

As McGuigan notes, the pattern of documentary evidence survival skews our perception of Máel Coluim's political activities and foreign policy as primarily Anglocentric. McGuigan demonstrates that, on the contrary, for much of his reign, Máel Coluim dealt with other neighbouring regions and potential royal contenders. These include Máel Snechtai, mormaer of Moray and Lulach's son; the king of Norway and earls of Orkney and Caithness; the *rí Gall* in Dublin; Strathclyde; and even Bamburgh, where the king managed to partially extend his power. Máel Coluim emerges out of Saint Margaret's shadow as a shrewd, politically gifted ruler who made important political and marital alliances that would ease his descendants' efforts to stabilise and expand the kingdom under their rule. Máel Coluim navigated, rather competently, the rapid political and socio-cultural changes arising from the demise of the Wessex royal line in England and the sudden installation of the Anglo-Norman rulers in their stead. Thus, McGuigan argues that Máel Coluim leveraged peaceful strategies to secure political and religious stability for the kingdom, despite what Anglo-Norman evidence might suggest.

Further evidence to this argument is provided in Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen, in which the monograph focuses on the legacies of Máel Coluim's wives, Ingibjorg and especially Margaret, in shaping the religious and court life in the kingdom. Reimagining the Scottish Church to be more aligned to contemporary Roman, and therefore continental, practices strengthened the legitimacy of Margaret's influence in the kingdom and of Máel Coluim and Margaret's descendants as rulers of the north and heirs to the Scottish and English thrones. Propaganda was, indeed, an effective tool in promoting the authority and power of the Scottish royal line, with Máel Coluim's posthumous reputation being the subject of the final two chapters. Beginning in the twelfth century, Máel Coluim's importance became enmeshed with Margaret's, seen as a dynastic "power couple" whose bloodline included several early English

saints. Towards the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Máel Coluim was transformed into Malcolm 'Canmore', an exiled prince-turned-moderniser of the Scottish kingdom and the source of 'feudal' innovations, particularly the establishment of Scotland's landed elite. As a result, Malcolm also became a Shakespearean character in the seventeenth century, eclipsed by the nefarious figure of the usurper Macbeth. These last two chapters contextualise Máel Coluim's post-mortem relevance to Scottish identity beyond the medieval period, a departure from biographical perspectives which shy away from historiographical analysis.

Máel Coluim III 'Canmore' is the biography I wish was available when I was conducting my doctoral research on medieval historiographical portrayals of Malcolm Canmore. Neil McGuigan is to be congratulated for writing a groundbreaking monograph that will bring much-needed attention to the figure of Máel Coluim III. He has also pioneered an innovative approach to writing royal biographies of medieval Scottish kings, one will influence the genre in the medieval Scottish history field.

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