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ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN

Mary Queen of Scots and the Scottish Civil Wars 1568–73

by

Katherine Thompson

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President's Introduction

Historians, amateur and professional, famous and infamous, fall into a number of categories. One group, that Edward Gibbon identifies as philosophical historians, tends to derive from historical events an understanding of moral and political philosophical questions. Historical events are seen as illustrations of philosophic truths. Another seem to be attempting merely to record facts without drawing any philosophical inferences or political truths from them.

Then there are those who are trying to advance some particular argument, support some political or moral position, or advance some current cause by reference to the past. One historian will argue for the folly, pointlessness and viciousness of war. Another will argue for the nobility, self-sacrifice and grandeur of war. One will argue for the civilising and beneficial effects of the Roman or British Empire. Another will argue for the oppressions and injustices of the Roman or British Empire. One will argue for the optimism of steady human progress. Another would delight in showing how human behaviour has not improved much over thousands of years.

Perhaps all of these different types of historian are really much the same. The historian who prides himself on simply recording the facts, expressing no opinions and arguing for no cause still inevitably does so by his selection of material and his selection of emphasis. There is a strong tendency for the victor to get a better press than the victim, unless the victim has friends outside the power of the victor. Perhaps the biggest change in the writing of history over the last hundred years is that improved communication of information means winners and losers will often have almost equal support internationally. The time when the winner could effectively wipe out the sympathetic historians of the loser seem to have gone. The difference between Gibbon's 'Philosophic Historian' and the one who is endeavouring by reference to history to advance a cause, will frequently just be a matter of balance or wisdom in the assessments made and the selection of material. Sadly, at least in the short term, wisdom and balance is no more likely to have popular acceptance than folly and prejudice. Indeed, we could probably find many examples where folly and prejudice are more readily accepted. I wonder whether wisdom and balance even has an advantage on the long-term in the survival of historical writings.

These questions lead to a consideration of our own Society. We gather together for meetings, we prepare papers and we publish this journal, but what sort of historians are we? It is probably fair to say that we are the usual mixture but sharing a view of the importance, significance or perhaps only interest to ourselves, of Scottish history. We live in a nation of mixed ethnic origins. Few of us find it attractive to think that our ancestry began only when we, our parents,

grandparents or great grandparents or remoter ancestry stepped off a plane or a boat in Australia. The world after all did not begin in 1788. The question, 'Where did we come from?', is a matter of continuing human interest.

Some of us have therefore been led to an interest in Scottish history, simply from a desire to know something about the past of our own ancestry. Some are led to particular interests by such personal questions why their Presbyterian grandparents so anxiously disliked anything to do with the Catholic Church. Some by tracing their own personal ancestry are able to study the historical events of Scotland in which they were involved. Some by identifying with their clan or name can find great satisfaction and pride in knowing the activities of their clan or their people or the people of their name in the distant or recent past. Taking pride in one's ancestry is certainly a common human experience — whether it is a good or a bad thing may be debated. Many member of our Society have taken a general interest in history, much as people may take up golf or stamp collecting. History can be a career but it can be an addiction at least more socially acceptable than alcohol or gambling. So our Society includes some members who are not in fact caught up by ancestral origins or ethnic background, but who are caught up by an interest in history and happen to have found Scottish history as a subject of study of particular interest to them.

Like any learned society therefore, we like to encourage an interest in Scottish history and particularly to encourage our members. Consistently with that view, this issue of our journal publishes the major work of our honorary secretary whom we have sought to encourage since her early undergraduate days. It happens also to deal with a period of Scottish history which has been over the years of particular interest to us.

Perhaps more consistently with interest in ancestry than our general historical interest, our covers have been the heraldic arms of members of our Society. From motives of economy we have in the past prepared the covers of four issues at one time. This issue is the first of four in which the arms displayed are the arms of our present treasurer, Matthew Glozier, who has over the years contributed many distinguished and indeed original papers to the meetings of the Society.

Malcolm D. Broun,
President