

*Red Scotland!: The Rise and Fall of the Radical Left, c. 1872 to 1932* by William Kenefick

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There is a prominent exclamation placed into the title of William Kenefick's *Red Scotland!: The Rise and Fall of the Radical Left, c. 1872 to 1932*, one which betrays the author's enthusiasm for the subject matter. *Red Scotland!* is Kenefick's most recent contribution to the field of Scottish labour history, and is very much a cumulative volume of his previous works on more localised phenomenon, notably displayed in works such as his seminal anthology *Roots of Red Clydeside 1910-1914?: Labour Unrest and Industrial Relations in West Scotland* (1996), which he co-edited with Arthur McIvor. Kenefick's aim with this book is ambitious: he means to present the radical, political left of Scotland, from the 1870s to the Depression era, operating roughly towards one united goal, regardless of the myriad party affiliations and regional influences. His passion for his subject matter is rooted firmly in a solid body of research, and he more often than not succeeds in proving that Scotland, if not a nation comprised exclusively of radical socialists, was at the very least heavily influenced by the coming of militant Marxism at the end of the nineteenth century.

In his introduction, Kenefick refers to this collective movement as a 'story' (p. 1), and seemingly organises his book in accordance with

that story. The eight chapters are presented in a roughly chronological order, beginning with the origins of Marxist politics in Scotland, and the particular quirks of Scottish socialism and trade unionism which differentiated them from their initially more dogmatic English brethren. Kenefick is especially interested the conflict between the local, established and artisanal unions of the mid-nineteenth century and the newly-formed, non-skilled and Irish-comprised unions formed in the later half of the century. The author proceeds to give in-depth accounts of the formation of two of the first national unions to take large-scale industrial action: the National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL), and the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS). A similarly excellent account is given of the July 1887 Broxburn shale miners' strike a watershed event for Edinburgh's socialists in their attempts to organise and create networks with other Scottish and English socialists and trade unionists.

*Red Scotland!*'s ambitions, perhaps surprisingly, are far better served when Kenefick is applying focus to more specific topics such as these. His two chapters on the Scottish left's response to the Great War and the Russian Revolution, for instance, are extremely effective. Kenefick makes excellent use of local newspapers to display not only the incredible pressure placed upon the war's leftist opponents (with the astonishing example from Dundee's *People's Journal* of a contest between aspiring ultra-patriotic, pro-war poets), but also the internal dialogue within the Scottish left, in particular Labour Party's unflagging support of the war, a stance in direct conflict with the more activist Independent Labour Party (ILP). Much of this debate was aired through *Forward*, the ILP's own newspaper, whose pages Kenefick examines assiduously. While not explicitly stated in the text,

this internal dialogue foreshadows future debates on the Scottish left about socialism's role not only in the British military state, but also on the complicated question of Scottish independence.

One of Kenefick's goals is to bust the stereotype of radical Scotland being confined to communities along the Clyde. The author's research into the archives of the former USSR reveals a great deal of tantalising correspondence between Aberdeen communists – most on the left of the ILP – and the Third International Congress in Moscow, done in the hope of maintaining international relations while attempting to achieve revolution in Scotland in the 1910s and 1920s. In fact, Kenefick's examinations of socialism in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee give a far more complete picture of Scottish socialism than is typically afforded by popular culture and historiography. When Kenefick focuses on specific areas such as this, he reveals a vibrant political and intellectual culture that was coming of age in an era of great instability.

Nevertheless, the overwhelmingly linear structure of the book often interferes with what Kenefick is attempting to describe. It is understandable that Kenefick would endeavour to use such a format, for he is attempting to show not only the existence of a united radical agenda, but also its progression over the course of several decades. While one can say that he is largely successful in this regard, it nevertheless results in a rather odd structure, one which views radical Scottish socialism's progression and eventual decline in grand phases rather than gradual evolution. The ending, in particular, is far too truncated. (Could this be a casualty of editing? Edinburgh University Press's copy editing, at least in this book, is far from flawless.) Kenefick ends his book with a definitive rupture – the ILP's

disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 1932 – but in doing so, he alludes to the ILP's grander dreams of creating a revolutionary culture with the ILP heavily involved in instituting a 'community-based political movement, with overlapping involvement in Socialist Sunday Schools, Clarion Clubs, Socialist music and dramatic societies, and Socialist study groups' (p. 203). Such an active prosecution of a radical lifestyle and socio-political support network among ILP members should feature at the forefront of any attempt to explain radical socialism's appeal at the turn of the century, but this paragraph is largely all that Kenefick discusses with regards to any of the various parties' cultural programmes. The political theatre, in any context, cannot be divorced from the larger social milieu.

An examination of this attempted cultural revolution in the book's middle chapters might have addressed this deficiency in helping to explain the evolution of Scottish socialism, but Kenefick errs with the disjointed focus of the disappointing third and fourth chapters. The third chapter attempts to examine and separate the myriad factions of the Scottish left, but struggles due to Kenefick's inability to keep it simple. Kenefick's zeal regarding his topic inadvertently illustrates the need for a cooler hand when studying these different groups individually. It is the fourth chapter, however, that is especially wanting, dealing obsessively with theory and past historiography relating to Marxist history in Scotland. Placing a theory chapter in the middle of the book disrupts the logical progression of ideas, and it is puzzling why Kenefick would not rather integrate discussions of theory into the opening chapters. Even in academic texts, an entire chapter devoted to names and books is not a way keep one's attention focused on an idea. Where a discussion

on cultural socialism would have flourished, a discussion of historiography stops the book's momentum dead in its tracks. To historians of Scotland, the signposts unveiled by Kenefick will make far more sense than to outsiders, who will likely be confused by the lack of a cultural framework for Scottish radicalism.

There are also times when Kenefick's strong belief in his thesis leads him down narrow paths. When discussing the work of fellow labour historian Bill Knox, Kenefick briefly acknowledges that Scottish socialism was originally borne largely of the 'ethical socialism' of Robert Burns and Henry George far more than Marxism itself (p. 24). If Scottish socialism began as a collection of more pragmatic, less worldly ideas, then can one paint the various regional outlets of the Scottish left with the same brush? This question becomes more troublesome when attempting to correlate direct action with a socialist consciousness. Kenefick, if not entirely uncritically, accepts as 'evidence' from *Forward* reports that crofters in the Highlands and Islands in April 1918 were using 'Bolshevik tactics' to demand that unused land be returned from landowners (pp. 179-180). Such incidents would have sparked a panic in the establishment newspapers of the day, and Kenefick's inability to obtain corroborating sources suggests a certain amount of wishful thinking on his part. After all, Kenefick states earlier that similar seizures took place in Skye during the late nineteenth century, and that they were largely derived from the anti-landlord socialism of the Irish Land League far more than a global Marxist agenda. Thus, while hypotheses such as this make for intriguing reading, more research would need to be completed before making a value judgment on the 'Bolshevism' of all social movements during the time period.

My criticism is not intended to detract from what Kenefick has achieved with this volume. Indeed, *Red Scotland!* seems largely intended as a starting point for further historiographical discourse, and also as a roadside marker to discuss what has been accomplished so far in the catalogue of Scottish labour history before World War II. Even if beset by occasional structural flaws and intermittent bouts of over-enthusiasm, Kenefick is still largely successful in displaying that the rise in Scotland's radical left coincided with the coming of a new trade unionism, one which more accurately reflected the demographic changes wrought upon Scotland in the mid to late nineteenth century. Scotland's radical left, which crested dramatically during the Great War, nevertheless forms a key component of Scotland's unique political culture to the present day, and one could do far worse than use *Red Scotland!* as a primer on Marxism's complicated relationship with the Scottish nation.