The Campbells 1250–1513 (review)

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This book represents an enormous amount of multi-disciplinary research, diligently obtained and expertly synthesised. It is an important work not merely because of its treatment of an important and often disregarded royal site, but also because of the close contextual study of a neglected piece of Pictish sculpture. Minor stylistic and editorial points aside, its relevance to the study of Pictish and Scottish royal sites cannot be overestimated, and it represents a valuable contribution to the study of early kingship in these islands.

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Stephen Boardman, *The Campbells 1250–1513*. John Donald: Edinburgh 2006. xxvi + 374 pp. £14.99 paperback.
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No family is more closely associated with the history of highland Scotland than that of the Campbells. More even than the MacDonalds, whose eclipse is almost always laid at their door, the kin of Clan Campbell have been portrayed both in the popular imagination and scholarly literature as the quintessential representatives of a Gaelic way of life that was at once distinct from, and more genuinely Scottish than, that of the lowland region of the kingdom, but, more important, as men who betrayed that simple, honest way of life in order to secure fame, wealth and power at the court of the Scottish king. In this beautifully written, carefully researched and thoroughly engaging study, Stephen Boardman sets out to demolish the twin images of the Campbells as agents of a 'sinister and inexorable assault upon the very fabric of Gaelic society' (p. 4) and the instruments of MacDonald destruction.

His is no easy task. Campbell-MacDonald historiography stretches far back into the early modern past. In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moreover, it travelled thousands of miles in the collective memory of Scottish emigrants, then took firm root across the face of the Anglophone world (and further beyond). Boardman unapologetically assumes the onerous task of rehabilitating the Campbells by means of what he calls a straightforward 'political narrative'. His approach, he none the less cautions, 'is not defence of [the family's] political opportunism, ruthlessness and aggression', for these qualities were 'the essential prerequisites for the successful exercise and extension of aristocratic power' in the late medieval and early modern milieux of Scotland. From his warts-and-all perspective, the men of the Campbell family appear, on more than one occasion, ruthless, vindictive, opportunistic and ambitious, but so do the noblemen with whom they competed for advantage; so, too, do the kings whom they served. Chief among their opponents in the arena of Scottish politics were members of the MacDonald family, lords of the

Isles, and they, too, used guile, resourcefulness and intrigue to advance their interests. If, in the end, the house of Sorley suffered defeat and ignominy, theirs was but the most prominent example of the vagaries of fortune and circumstance that afflicted a host of other Scottish aristocrats. Loyalty to the crown, Boardman further argues, was not by definition inimical to the preservation or celebration of Gaelic culture. In fact, the Campbells emerged as leaders of Gaelic society, and maintained their prominence, precisely because, better than most, they knew how to balance the interests of their native homeland against the pressures of lowland politics. Boardman's approach to the fraught historiography of his subject matter allows him, then, to portray the Campbells as exemplifications, if on a national scale, of magnate survival in a political world that was characterised by turbulence, uncertainty and danger.

The Campbells have probably generated more studies than any other Scottish noble family from the medieval or early modern periods, and Boardman's work joins a field already densely crowded with reinterpretations and re-examinations of the powerful clan. Yet what sets this book apart from the host of others are its clarity of purpose, the tight focus that its author maintains through twelve densely packed chapters, and the scope that it offers for novel interpretations of long held beliefs. The work is not, perhaps, for the uninitiated: there are few digressions into the realm of the fanciful, no value judgments offered in respect of its protagonists' motives, and little speculation about how different decisions on their part might have changed the course of history. Sir Neil Campbell, the fabled progenitor of Campbell fortunes, for example, emerges from Boardman's narrative as little more than one of a series of pragmatic, if loyal, adherents of Robert Bruce, one whose personal risk taking paid off in the years after 1309, when the king was in a position to reward him, but who failed, ultimately, to position himself or his sons at the apex of highland society. That accolade fell, rather, to Sir Neil's younger grandson, Gillespic, who through good fortune, a promising marriage, and an uncanny ability to ride out the political storms of the mid-fourteenth century, was able to position himself, together with John MacDonald and Robert the Steward, as one of a triumvirate of magnates able to exercise good lordship over the numerous kindreds of the western highlands and islands.

Fortune smiled a great deal on the Campbells between the time of Gillespic of Arran and 1513, when his descendant, Archibald, second earl of Argyll, fell at Flodden beside his king. From their initial base in mid-Argyll, and often at the expense of political rivals, the lords of Loch Awe steadily built up a lordship that stretched from Kintyre northwards to Lismore, expanded their influence into all the major

burghs of the west, and acquired valuable property in the royal centres of Edinburgh and Stirling. But real and meaningful service to the crown – as sheriffs and later royal lieutenants of Argyll, as loyal adherents of (and suppliers of troops to) the house of Stewart, as royal ambassadors, and as holders of such important royal offices as those of master of the household, chamberlain and chancellor – was the equally solid bedrock of their sustained influence in the west. The involvement of the family's chief representatives in national politics made it impossible for them to avoid court intrigue, and on occasion they considered it judicious to observe such machinations from a distance. But unlike the MacDonald lords of the Isles, the Campbells were never foolish enough to challenge the king's supremacy over their territories.

The Campbells' control over their west coast tenants and kinsmen was complex and multi-faceted. In one of the most interesting chapters of the book, Boardman examines the economic, social and political economy of Campbell-style lordship, exploring the basis of the tremendous wealth that they accumulated through the careful exploitation of the natural resources of their lands and the establishment of family bases in burghs as diverse as Inveraray, Glasgow, Dumbarton, Irvine, Ayr, Rothesay, Rutherglen and Renfrew. More impressive still is Boardman's skilled handling, throughout the work, of the myriad literary and historical sources that treat the subject of the family's rise to prominence. He offers thoughtful insight, for example, into such key materials as Blind Harry's *The Wallace*, the 'official' Clanranald history, and Campbell accounts of the events of the later fifteenth century, and shows how the perspectives of their authors are not always as apparent as scholars have claimed. In an altogether convincing passage arguing in favour of a re-dating of the so-called 'Flodden poem', he argues against the portrayal of Archibald earl of Argyll as the aggressive agent of a rapacious central government, prepared mindlessly to impose the royal will on unsuspecting highlanders. In Boardman's capable hands, the Campbells emerge as sympathetic supporters of Gaelic custom and tradition, ably acting as intermediaries between the culture of the highlanders and that of the more urbane lowlanders.

Boardman's Campbells are by no means tragically misunderstood historical figures in need of a champion. Gillespic of Arran, Duncan first lord Campbell, Colin and Archibald, first and second earls of Argyll, and the many kinsmen who made up membership in their clan were ambitious men, sometimes vindictive, and often greedy. But, from the period of the wars of independence down to the early sixteenth century they were also more skilled than most of their peers at navigating the troubled waters of the Scottish political scene. It was no accident that in the eighteenth century, the family's chief

representatives should still have been able to sustain their dual roles as representatives of western Gaeldom and of lowland aristocratic power. The central place that the Campbells continued to occupy on the Scottish stage after 1513 was, rather, the culmination of a remarkable ability to adapt to changing circumstances and, as they had always done, to balance overweening ambition against hard-headed reasoning.

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Francis J. O'Hagan, *The Contribution of the Religious Orders to Education in Glasgow during the period 1847–1918*. The Edwin Mellon Press: Lewiston, NY, 2006. pp. 290. £74.95.
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The impact that the religious teaching congregations made upon Glasgow's educational landscape has been a neglected theme in Scottish history. Whilst some attention has recently been directed towards the female communities, Scotland's male congregations appear even more elusive. This topic has tremendous potential for further exploration, and the wealth of untapped material in the community and congregational archives will no doubt inspire further research and scholarship. Frank O'Hagan presents an analysis of the contribution that five religious congregations made to Catholic education in Glasgow. His multi-disciplinary study includes seven chapters that incorporate religious, political and sociological elements, and although labelled an historical work, it has a distinctively social science flavour.

Importantly, O'Hagan highlights the formidable impact that the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, the Sisters of Mercy, the Marist Brothers, the Society of Jesus and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur had on influencing the 'social, educational and cultural' history of Scotland. More specifically, he points out that each congregation saw education as central to the overall improvement of Glasgow's Catholic population. The idea of 'mission' played a central role in permitting the religious to embark upon such an endeavour, and his emphasis on this concept also helps paint a picture of Catholicism in the city before the Catholic hierarchy was restored in 1878. Of significant value is the detail he provides on organisations such as the Catholic Poor Schools Committee, but equally useful is his discussion on how the Education (Scotland) Act became a vital catalyst for change in a system that was 'unable to compete' due in large part to a shortage of funds and certificated teachers. His approach to these points in particular clearly illustrates the obstacles confronting Catholic education in Glasgow and the need for the religious teaching congregations.