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Patrick Ferguson: 'A Man of Some Genius' (review)

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as might be desired, although this probably reflects the paucity of source material. However, for scholars with an interest in early American and Canadian history, or in the development of European Atlantic empires, this is an important work that provides a rich context and comparison for developments elsewhere.

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MATTHEW C. WARD

Patrick Ferguson: 'A Man of Some Genius'.

By M.M. Gilchrist. Pp. xii, 84.

ISBN 1 901663 74 4.

Edinburgh: NMS Enterprises. 2003. £7.99.

This is a small book, just ninety-six pages in all, with twelve black-and-white illustrations. The general editor of the series is the same person who has edited two very useful National Museums of Scotland series, 'Scots Lives' and 'Scotland's Past in Action', Iseabail MacLeod. Both series incorporate quite important little surveys, including, for example, the only general overview of the history of Scottish education that the late Don Withrington ever wrote. It is not the big book his peers expected for a professional lifetime, and which he was so well qualified to write, but it is better than nothing. This slim volume, however, is rather different in format from the other titles in the two series, because the nature of its subject enabled there to be co-operation in its publication, and one hopes in its sale, with the Royal Armouries. Their Head of Collections, Graeme Rimmer, contributes a foreword, pointing out that the Royal Armouries acquired in 2000 a particularly fine and well-documented example of the rifle with a screw-plug breech-loading mechanism that Ferguson patented in 1776, and which, though produced in such small quantities as to be an extreme rarity for collectors today, made the rifle a practical and serviceable military weapon at the time. The main trouble with small books that are inherently important is the same trouble as with small books in general: they are difficult to market. It would, however, be a great pity if the significance of this particularly important little book were to escape wider notice.

First and most obviously, it is a detailed biography, as far as the here scrupulously-surveyed surviving manuscript and printed sources permit, of a man who is most important in the history of firearms. Born in the Edinburgh of the Enlightenment in 1744, Patrick Ferguson came from a North-East family, the Fergusons of Pitfour, with strong Jacobite associations, though his father was a jurant Episcopalian who had no difficulties in accepting the Protestant Succession and swearing the oaths to the Illustrious House of Hanover. The family fortunes had been damaged in the South Sea Bubble, but Patrick's father James was a most successful advocate and, despite defending Jacobite prisoners at Carlisle in 1746, became Dean of Faculty in 1760 and a Lord of Session in 1764. There is interesting material in this biography on Patrick's close relations with his mother and three sisters, and it is clear that the sisters were far from stereotypically 'feminine' in their interests, despite being brought up in an age when the rise of sentimentality threatened to impose a singularly limited range of physical and emotional expectations upon middle- and upper-class women. Sister Jean, for example, at the age of sixteen had, according to her mother, devoted most of her energies to hunting, shooting, riding and Latin, and very little to needlework, though she enjoyed playing chess and bowls with her mother. Unless you happen to have read the foretaste of this affectionate and lively family in the brief pamphlet (justified by the family mausoleum) that

Dr Marianne Gilchrist produced for the Society of Friends of the Kirk of the Greyfriars in 1999, much of this is as new as it is refreshing.

Educated at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, Patrick Ferguson was commissioned first into the Scots Greys, though he subsequently transferred to the 70th Foot and died a major, acting colonel, commanding American loyalist militia at the Battle of King's Mountain. Always an enquiring soldier proud of his Scots identity, he had the passion for improvement that marked so many of his nation. He funded many of his experiments with improved weapons himself, and they were not confined to shoulder weapons, for he also experimented with a light breech-loading field-piece. That never proved itself in action as his excellent rifle did. His spirit was as remarkable as his mind, for he was plagued by illness and wounds from the start to the finish of his brief career. Latterly his right arm and hand were effectively useless due to the shattering of his arm by a musket ball, but he taught himself to write, fence and ride with his left hand. He lived and died a very brave man. That is the central message of Marianne Gilchrist, inspired by an understandable passion for her extraordinary subject.

There is a deeper point to be made, however. As the author says in this book, Ferguson, though demonised by American republicans in his lifetime and since, was one of the heroes of the War of the American Revolution. Like most ideologically-driven republican movements (the French and Irish cases are very similar), the American one has from the start been honkingly self-righteous and devoted to committing cultural genocide on those American political traditions that disagreed with it, usually starting the job with systematic physical terrorism against any unfortunate Loyalist groups caught in the maelstrom of the Revolution. Exhibitions on the 'Black Heroes of the Revolution' are intermittently held in the Capitol in Washington, without any mention of the fact that a majority of the blacks who fought heroically in the War of the Revolution fought for good reason for a good cause — that of King George III. Ferguson appears to have been the only non-American present at King's Mountain. He was a man of liberal mind and would have preferred the American crisis settled by negotiation. The war was a protracted, bloody, murky civil war marked by incompetence and bad faith on both sides. After the extremely radical concessions offered by the Carlisle Commission, Ferguson fought with a clear conscience against the irreconcilables who were going to create a new and hostile state. His only charge against the king and his ministers was the just one that they were fighting an inevitable war in a manner likely to make an unavoidably bad outcome worse. Historians are not, or should not be, cheerleaders. They need to deconstruct the aggressive over-simplification of the past. This wee book is a step in that direction.

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BRUCE LENMAN

Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815.

By Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling and David N. Doyle.

Pp. xxvii, 788.

ISBN 0 19 5044513 0.

Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2003. £45.00.

This handsomely produced and highly readable volume on Irish immigration to America can best be understood and read as two complementary books, one an exposition of the experiences of Irish immigrants to the (future) United States and the Caribbean and the other a more argument-based work about the