

Book Reviews

Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages (The Gill History of Ireland, 4) by Kenneth Nicholls. Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1972. Pp. 197. 80p.

The subject of this book has never been seriously tackled before, and Mr Nicholls is to be congratulated not just on undertaking a study which leaves him open to an unusually large number of critics, but on producing a general work to serve as a framework for students of the Middle Ages in the greater part of Ireland. The book, like the rest of the series, is intended for the general public, and is therefore almost entirely free of notes and references. It would be difficult for anyone, but especially for the non-historian, in the absence of such supporting evidence, to give a competent criticism of the conclusions drawn. 'The popular work has in this case come before the learned monograph', says the author: if the conclusions in this book can be argued for successfully, then a great service will have been done for the history of the Gaelic world.

The book is in two sections, headed *Society and Institutions* and *Historical*. The first gives a general account of politics, the legal system, social life, the Church and what little is known of economic life. The second deals in turn with the four provinces, tracing quickly the leadership and vicissitudes of the principal families in each during the period of the book (1169–c. 1600), and is followed by a critical bibliography which shows how sparse is the reliable material already available on Mr Nicholls' subject.

It becomes clear that the laws and customs of the Gaelic and Gaelicised areas varied widely both geographically and chronologically—as one might expect. It is probably unavoidable that the larger part of the material quoted deals with Gaelicised Norman families, and we cannot always be sure that what applied to them also applied to those, especially in the north, who had never had much to do with the Normans. Mr Nicholls acknowledges cases where these differences occur or may be expected to occur.

The position in the Scottish Highlands is not dealt with, although they were, says the author, 'an integral part of the Gaelic Irish world'—a generalisation which will need considerable qualification. Some snippets of interest for Scotland do slip through, however: a 'Rory Mac Betha', physician, is on record in County Cork in 1473 and is presumably connected with the Beaton family, and the O Conchuir medical family (see *Scottish Studies* 12:64) is said to have originated in County Laois (p. 81; no substantiation for the latter statement is given). Mr Nicholls also detects in sixteenth-century Munster a class of 'bondmen' who seem to be remarkably similar to the Scottish tacksmen (p. 69). While the Index adds greatly to the book's value as a reference

work, entries under 'Scotland' are not exhaustive: the following page-numbers may be added: 74-5, 87-8, 98-9, 134-8.

In undertaking to break this new ground Mr Nicholls forces us to recognise the necessity for a parallel work on the Scottish Highlands over a similar period. So much of our 'knowledge' of this period is based on inference from other periods, or indeed on prejudice, that even a complete list of available reliable sources would be a great step forward. However, the dichotomy between Celtic studies and historical studies complained of by Mr Nicholls exists just as strongly in Scotland, alas, as it does in Ireland, and the scholar who undertakes this work will be, like Mr Nicholls, a pioneer.

COLM Ó BAOILL

A Hundred Years in the Highlands by Osgood Mackenzie. Geoffrey Bles, London 1972 (10th impression). Pp. 222+illus. £1.75.

This new impression of what has become a classic volume on the subject of the Highlands in the nineteenth century suggests that Osgood Mackenzie's attraction as a writer has in no way lost its appeal since the book was first published in 1921. Because of this, it is a familiar volume on Scottish bookshelves, but nevertheless, it is highly relevant that, today, we should pause to examine its content and approach, as well as to look at Mackenzie's life and times in the light of history.

There are three distinct facets to *A Hundred Years*: firstly, Mackenzie's reminiscences of family life on a Highland estate from 1850 onwards; secondly, his vivid descriptions of the sporting life of the times, including fishing, fowling and stalking; and finally, an account of what must be regarded as his most enduring achievement—the origins and development of the sub-tropical gardens at Inverewe. This occupies a large part of the book, and includes a chapter by the author's daughter, the late Mrs Mairi T. Sawyer, who gave the gardens to the National Trust for Scotland in 1952.

Osgood Mackenzie was born in Brittany in 1842: his upbringing was in Gairloch and must have been extremely pleasant. His family seems to have been close-knit and affectionate, and his early years saw his initiation not only into the sporting side of the laird's son's education, but also in the practical side of the daily work of the estate. We get the impression of an enthusiastic and hard-working young man, in a privileged position in society, enjoying the benefits of his social position, and his natural environment, to the full.

One of the most valuable features of this book is the writer's regard for tradition in his surroundings. The earlier chapters abound with details of now-forgotten Highland techniques, like the making of peat charcoal (p. 46), snippets of traditional beliefs and customs, and in general terms, the more unusual aspects of daily life in the Wester Ross of the time. One is struck, also, by his accounts of the way of life enjoyed by his

family in the 'Tigh Dige', the great moat house of the Mackenzies in Gairloch, which still stands. The domestic affairs of the household, and the daily activities of the estate and its workers are described with much detail, and with an obviously keen interest in their execution. Certainly, Mackenzie's pre-occupation with his immediate physical surroundings is well expressed in his writing despite the fact that at this time, and later in the century, lairds were beginning to devote less and less time to the maintenance of their estates, and becoming, increasingly, absentee landlords.

Not surprisingly, Mackenzie's sporting activities on his estate take up a good deal of space. He dwells at length on his (and his father's) prowess with the gun, giving detailed accounts of the enormous amount of game which the sportsmen of those days exterminated. Scarcely any wild animal or bird seems to have been safe from his gun, or those of his gamekeepers, least of all the golden eagle, which in those days of 'unprotected' birds, was a prime target. It was regarded, even up till 1930 and later, as vermin, and with the subsequent attention paid to it by keepers in Wester Ross, its numbers decreased, so that by the 1950s, it was virtually extinct in the area. Mackenzie was a keen collector of birds' eggs, and describes his attempts to obtain those of the sea-eagle, extremely rare in the middle of the last century, and now gone from the Scottish mainland. This account of the rapacious process of game-shooting and egg-collecting comes naturally from the writer's pen, and he seems to have regarded his pursuit of rare birds and animals as legitimate and entirely innocent. Yet he laments the passing of the hare and ptarmigan, dunlin and grouse from the moors of Wester Ross (p. 132) as if the sporting gentry were in no way to blame for it. Significantly, though, Mackenzie notes the gradual change in climate which since 1850 has partly affected the growth of various trees and plants in the Highlands. As a careful observer of wild life, his contribution in these chapters provides much valuable information.

The middle of the nineteenth century was a time when social change in the Highlands was lagging behind that of other parts of the country. Despite the fact that the Gairloch area was spared the worst of the evictions, it was by no means uncommon for tenants to be turned out, and the writer makes several references to the eviction of local people for sheep-stealing, poaching, and suchlike crimes. But on the whole, this subject is avoided, and the book gives the impression, rightly or wrongly, that the laird's relationship to his tenants was that of a father-figure and worthy at all times of their unswerving devotion. Certainly, there is little evidence to the contrary either in this book or in local tradition in the Gairloch area. Osgood Mackenzie is still held in high esteem by the older members of the population, as indeed are many of the Mackenzies of Gairloch. This is partly due to the fact that as a boy Osgood Mackenzie was taught Gaelic and spoke the language fluently. His English mother learned it on settling in Gairloch, despite having *blas na beurla* (the taste of the English) all her life. Indeed, Gaelic was the only language spoken in the Tigh Dige in the 1850s, and as Mackenzie writes, 'No servant on the place, inside or outside, was allowed ever to speak English to the young gentlemen under pain of being dismissed' (p. 41).

One gains the impression, on reading this book, that the writer has been much influenced by the personalities of two people. Although his father died when Osgood was only a year old, his uncle, Dr John Mackenzie of Eileanach became the factor of Gairloch Estate. The doctor was a keen antiquary, and amassed a great collection of notes and reminiscences of his own early days, and Osgood obviously drew on this wealth of information for background material. His mother, Mary Hanbury Mackenzie must have been a very accomplished and energetic woman. She personally superintended the building of the new road along the western shore of Loch Maree, which was financed partly by Government grant for famine relief. She founded several new schools in the Gairloch parish, insisting that children should be able to read Gaelic before they should be taught in English. Under her supervision, the old runrig system was abolished, and a start was made on laying out crofting townships under the present system.

The picture which Osgood Mackenzie has painted in his book is obviously only one viewpoint of his times. It would be naive to suggest that we are given a balanced and unbiased account of the parish of Gairloch over the period in question. There is no doubt that the other side of the coin, poverty, eviction and emigration, made their mark on the parish during this time, that the ingredients which went into the make-up of Highland society were often bitterly unacceptable to the mass of the population. Undoubtedly, their loyalty to the chiefs was often misguided and given because of tradition rather than anything else. There are many accounts in the Gairloch area of families being evicted for 'stepping out of line'. One story concerns an old crofter-fisherman whose sons went out cod-fishing in the Minch, their father being ill. On making a good haul, they decided to sell the catch to an 'east-coast' buyer rather than accept the lower price offered by the estate factor, whom they were bound to deal with, on pain of eviction. When served with notice of eviction, their father rose from his sick-bed, walked to the Tigh Dige and begged forgiveness for his sons' rashness. He was given another chance, but was made to promise that such a breach of loyalty to the laird would not occur again.

It is necessary, then, to try to see beyond Osgood Mackenzie's account of his times in order to gain a true perspective of the social situation. With this in mind, this book must be accepted for what it is—the experience of one man and his view of his environment in a period of intense interest both to scholarship and the reading public. In its own inimitable way, *A Hundred Years in the Highlands* seems destined to remain a minor classic.

IAN FRASER

Books Received

Some of these books may be reviewed later in *Scottish Studies*

- The Scottish Revolution 1637-44. The Triumph of the Covenanters*, by David Stevenson. David and Charles, Newton Abbot 1973. Pp. 416 (incl. 16 plates). £7.50.
- The Scottish Church 1688-1843. The Age of the Moderates*, by Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch. Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1973. Pp. 282. £4.
- Beyond the Sunset: A Study of James Leslie Mitchell (Lewis Grassie Gibbon)* by Douglas Young. Impulse Books, Aberdeen 1973. Pp. 162. £3.50.
- An Introduction to English Folk Song* by Maud Karpeles. Oxford University Press, London 1973. Pp. 120. £1.15.
- The Battle of Mauchline Moor 1648* by David Stevenson. (Ayrshire Collections vol. II no. 1). Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 1973. Pp. 44. 25p.
- So Fast to Ruin: The Ayr Bank Crash* (The personal element in the collapse of Douglas, Heron and Company) by Frank Brady. (Ayrshire Collections vol. II no. 2). Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 1973. Pp. 44. 25p.
- A Scottish Ballad Book*, edited by David Buchan. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston 1973. Pp. 232. £3.50.
- The Organic Resources of Scotland: Their Nature and Evaluation*, edited by Joy Tivy. Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1973. Pp. 227. £5.
- Come Day, Go Day, God send Sunday*. The songs and life story, told in his own words, of John Maguire, traditional singer and farmer from Co. Fermanagh, collated by Robin Morton. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1973. Pp. 188. £2.95.
- The Tweedmakers. A History of the Scottish Fancy Woollen Industry 1600-1914* by Clifford Gulvin. (Library of Textile History Series) David and Charles, Newton Abbot 1973. Pp. 240 + 9 plates. £4.50.
- Lowland Scots. Papers presented to an Edinburgh Conference*. Association for Scottish Literary Studies Occasional Papers No. 2, Edinburgh 1973. Pp. 72. 50p.