

Ian Mitchell's Scotland-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

07 – *Patronage and Principle* - Fry

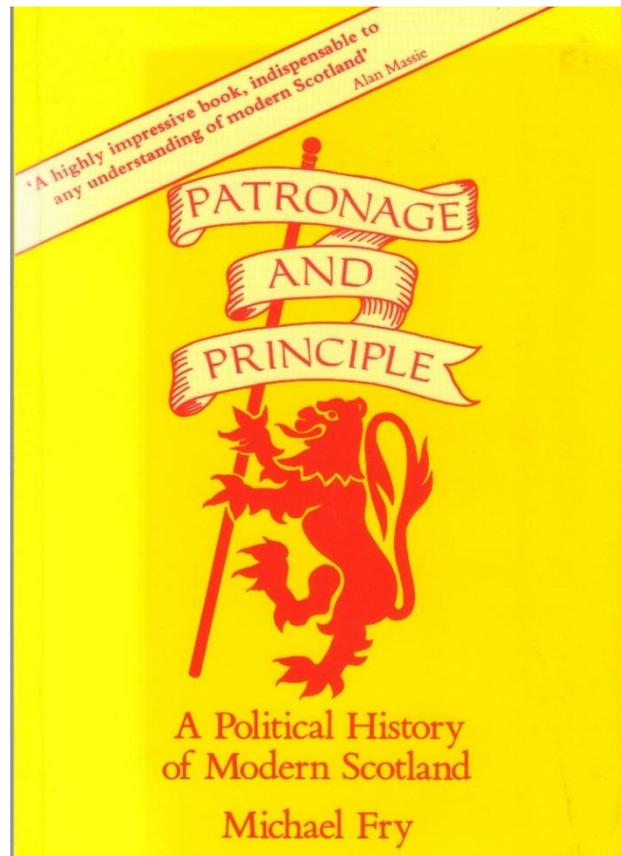
Title: PATRONAGE AND PRINCIPLE – A POLITICAL HISTORY OF MODERN SCOTLAND

Author: Michael Fry

Publication info: Published in 1989 by Mercat Press (now part of Birlinn Ltd.)
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

Keywords: Scotland, politics, Unionism, Home Rule, the Kirk, socialism

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 21 March 2018



Reason to read: When published thirty years ago, this was the first modern account of the *political* history of Scotland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unusually, it was written by an independent scholar and journalist who is also an Englishman and a Tory, but one who votes for the Scottish National Party. Michael Fry has published many other authoritative books about the post-1707 history of his adopted country. This one describes its evolution from a position of broad cultural independence in the early nineteenth century, when the London government concerned itself with little more than foreign affairs and defence, to the situation of almost complete assimilation today, due to two world wars and the subsequent experiment with socialism. The counterpoint to this was the movement for Home Rule which emerged after 1886 (as a consequence of Irish Home Rule). Fry puts all this in the context of the decline of traditional Scottish individualism and shows how it was accompanied by parallel declines in prosperity, creativity and national self-confidence. His fascinating book presages the situation today when anti-British separatism coexists with authoritarian nationalist collectivism. It is a story of forgotten freedoms.

Main talking points:

1. Up the time of the Disruption, in 1843, when the Free Church broke away from the Church of Scotland, the Kirk was an extremely powerful guardian of Scotland's cultural independence, partly because it was the "established Church" and partly because it fulfilled such a wide range of social functions, from education to help with poor relief. After that, "as a less harmonious and unified country, Scotland was rapidly provincialised. Formerly, the balance and co-operation of

her institutions had helped preserve her semi-independence; now the two most important, the Church and the law, had come into open, bitter conflict. Established religion was in effect overthrown and with it the only possible source of a native reforming impulse. So London necessarily became the centre of Scottish affairs.” (p. 54) The Disruption was therefore, according to Fry, “the most important event in the whole of Scotland’s nineteenth century history.” (p. 52)

2. In the later nineteenth century, the Scottish working class was divided into the unskilled and the skilled workers, and the latter were deeply anti-collectivist. “Their pride was in the individualist traditions of artisan and craftsman.... The Scots remained overwhelmingly loyal to the Liberal party and especially to the radical wing. Its programme—the destruction of privilege, the limitation of government power, the extension of civil liberty and the improvement of popular education—represented public opinion in Scotland... The Scots radicals were rigorously purist in their *laissez-faire* principles and unsympathetic to the demands for higher wages, shorter hours and unemployment relief. Some even railed against the Factory Acts and the very institution of trade unions.” (p. 98)
3. That situation first began to change in Glasgow. The city “was Unionist because it was imperialist; it was imperialist because its prosperity was bound up with the Empire... Glasgow now had relatively little in common with the rest of Scotland. It had moved far ahead of a country otherwise of gracious, old-fashioned cities, small burghs and thinly peopled uplands, the seedbeds of traditional Liberalism. Its connections with America and Europe were closer than those with London, or even Edinburgh. It had cast off parochialism and liked to think big. That was reflected in the philosophy of the corporation, a pioneer of municipal reform, active in building up public utilities and services. It was also notoriously authoritarian... A new political spirit was being born in Glasgow: collectivist, interventionist and in the end alien to the libertarian radicalism of most Scots.” (p. 110)
4. The effort necessary to fight the First World War successfully was such that “sectional interests had to be overridden and cajoled, even coerced, if they resisted. A people which placed individualist values above all found itself, with the active connivance of its own political establishment, subjected to the levelling, bureaucratic apparatus of a modern state engaged in total war.” (p. 134) The result was strikes on the Clyde in 1915 against the dilution skilled labour by unskilled. “The effect of the labour troubles on Scotland was profound. The working class learned the value of solidarity, which replaced the individualistic traditions whose defence had been the object of the strikers in 1915.... The vocabulary of class struggle now became familiar. In a country used to disputing in the language of Burns or the Bible, it was a fatal blow to the old national ethos.” (p. 136)
5. Since class struggle is by definition general rather than local, this contributed to the cultural assimilation of Scotland into the rest of the UK. The Labour Party rose to local dominance after the Second World War by exploiting the socialist approach to subsidies and creating a general tolerance of dependence on them. The Scottish National Party adopted a similar approach, though justifying it on the righting of alleged historical wrongs, and challenged Labour by making a claim to moral rectitude. However, Fry says, “it was hard to take seriously a party which preached independence yet practiced dependence.” (p. 254)

Incidental interest: Fry quotes John Buchan on the old Liberal party as he saw it in 1911. Substitute SNP or Labour for Liberals and the characterisation rings as true today as it did over a century ago: “Its dogmas were so completely taken for granted that their presentation partook less of argument than tribal incantations. Mr Gladstone had given it an aura of earnest morality so that its platforms were also pulpits and its harangues had the weight of sermons. Its members seemed to assume that their opponents must be lacking in either morals or in mind. The Tories were the ‘stupid’ party; Liberals alone understood and sympathised with the poor; a working man who was not a Liberal was inaccessible to reason, or morally corrupt, or intimidated by laird or employer. I remember a lady summing up the attitude thus: ‘Tories may think they are better born, but Liberals know they are born better.’” (p. 129)

Style: Lively and literate, if perhaps a little impersonal. Still, unlike most history written today, it is blessedly free from academic fact-strutting and ostentatious footnoting.

Surprising points: By the end of the 1980s, Scotland had become so accustomed to dependence, subservience and the intellectual tramlines of the “class struggle” that the lazy habit of consensus had completely displaced the old traditions of vigorous independent thinking. Bureaucracy had replaced the Bible as the source of rules for respectable society. “Hegemony, the establishment of something akin to a one-party state, had been found to be an efficient option. It suited the nation’s penchant for hereditary political connections, originally of kinship, now of class [and, one might add today, of nationality]. *It could even be made compatible with democracy once the minor parties adopted in essentials the programme of the dominant one.*” (p. 255) (emphasis added)

Fry’s book ends at a time when open government and public debate had become anathema to the Scottish ruling class, which wanted consensus not creativity. He concludes by describing the Tory establishment of late Thatcher times in terms which seem to me to apply to the Labour/Green/ SNP establishment today: “In Scotland, government is conducted behind closed doors. Debates are predictable and lifeless. Policies are geared to institutions and interests either themselves adjuncts of the bureaucracy or else unconcerned with any but their own fixed demands... The consensus, however well-meaning, inevitably turns inert, inflexible and hostile to novelty. Perpetual friction there may be, but it is of the sort which grinds down rather than produces bursts of flame.” (p. 256)

Link(s): You can see Fry arguing the anti-Unionist case in the run-up to the 2014 referendum with Michael Portillo and others in this clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcT11EII7X8>

Negative issue(s): It would be nice if a second edition were to continue the story to the present.

Overall recommendation level: VERY HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a 5-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbeltown and can be contacted at ianbookrec@gmail.com.