*Scotch Baronial, Architecture and National Identity in Scotland*

By Miles Glendinning and Aonghus MacKechnie

This excellent book from Glendinning and MacKechnie offers an insightful critical analysis of the lasting, multifaceted, and far-reaching usage of castellated architecture in Scotland. It will become a must-read for architectural historians working on this period, but its investigation of architectural trends within the context of political and social changes will make it of interest well beyond the confines of the discipline. The comprehensive – if unavoidably succinctly outlined – overview of existing published material on the topic of Scottish castles and Scottish architecture in general, becomes here the springboard upon which the authors’ own narrative develops. The chronological organisation of the chapters helpfully anchors and relates the narrative to known historical events. This subdivision could have proven constrictive, but consistently addressing continuing trends and thematic overlaps instead provides the necessary ‘connective tissue’ between chronologically separate sections.

Scottish castellated styles in their successive embodiments are here presented as evolving cultural and architectural responses to a sense of self that is both profoundly rooted and eminently fluid – and at all scales, from the individual to the collective, from royal residences and to national landmarks, adaptable to educational, commercial, and parliamentary buildings. The book works at multiple levels; it investigates landmark buildings in great detail – Inverary Castle, Holyrood Palace, Balmoral Castle, but also castellated influences on civic structures, demonstrating the versatility and breath of this style. It also examines lesser-known regional trends and brings to the fore the contribution of individual architects or (chiefly, but not only royal) patrons and clients. The strength of this book is however in addressing the geographically and politically broader context, considering the role of foreign influences – selectively applied, popularised, reorganised and adapted, abandoned, and again rediscovered – in giving tangible, visible form to the development of Scotland’s composite national identity. In this context, the discussion on Scotland’s Celtic sense of self and relation with Irish culture, and the country’s own role as a trendsetter in relation to the colonies, are of great significance and the reader is left hoping for more. Of particular interest is the focus on the Scottish-English political and architectural discourse as a two-ways affair, where both countries tried to define and make explicit through careful stylistic choices Scotland’s expected position as England’s northern competitor, within the Union, and later within the British empire.

The increasingly broader outlook as the chapters progress addresses the increasingly broad world that Scotland found itself inhabiting, and relates Scotland’s own search for an architectural national identity to major political and cultural shifts, from the Reformation to the Congress of Vienna, from the English Revolution to the advent of the Arts and Crafts movement. Of particular interest – if only tantalisingly hinted at – was the parallel with Germany’s own search for a representative style, emphasising Scotland’s role of pioneer in the expression of nationalism. The extensive discussion on England’s national architecture before and after the Union addressed the efforts of architects working across the border to convey the countries’ distinct but harmonious contribution to a shared Britishness. This greatly helped the reader better understand the context and rationale of stylistic and architectural choices in both countries. Similarly, the analysis of Scottish historical and literary sources, of treatise traditions, and of published surveys of built heritage offered a reasoned explanation of the increasing public fascination with castellated architecture. The ever-changing balance between old-fashioned defensive concerns, classical symmetry, irregular arrangement of masses, scenic settings, and practicality of use originated a rich tapestry of castle and castle-inspired structure, evocative of the values associated with the past they ideally represented. The focus on figures such as Mackintosh, Spence, and particularly Geddes – the latter sympathetically reimagining Edinburgh urban spaces – exemplifies the compatibility of selected elements of the castellated traditions with twentieth-century expectations and with the modern movement.

*Scotch Baronial* is a thought-provoking book densely packed with information, but it is also highly enjoyable to read. If approached without a fair-to-good knowledge of the Scottish architectural context it would need to be supplemented by some of the readings listed in the ample bibliography, to get a more rounded understanding of the scholarship upon which the writers’ own rich narrative is founded. However, even a novice would enjoy reading this book, from which they would get a satisfying overall understanding of the relationship between architecture, politics, and national identity in Scotland and Britain. This book investigates how to find suitable (architectural) answers to society’s anxiety over change, to the uncertainties brought over by negotiating a political and economic union with demanding neighbours, and to the uncertainties brought over by radicalism but also by democracy. It also discusses the physical evidence of Scotland’s constant expectations of a recognition – symbolically through architecture if not practically through legislative action – of the northern nation’s contribution to a bottom-heavy Britain. It is, in fact, a highly pertinent book for the current times.

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