David Hurdle

*The Life of Kirkpatrick Macmillan*

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This little biography is written by a distant relative, it reads as if its author is not used to writing history and there is a charming naiveté to the writing that is quite engaging, as if it is a bit of a voyage of discovery. In its simplicity, it covers a lot of significant contextual details, child mortality, common mortal illnesses, the construction of the Scottish road system, shortly followed by the railway system, waves of rural depopulation in favour of urban life and jobs in industry. All this provides the reader with an idea of the issues in the Dumfriesshire of period of Macmillan’s life. It could make more of some things, such as the social mobility of the Macmillan family and particularly of the parish school system in Scotland that resulted in a very high level of adult literacy, but, in general, an enjoyable read.

Where it goes wrong is in crediting Macmillan with inventing a pedamotive bicycle, indeed crediting Macmillan with inventing the bicycle itself. This is no surprise, few who have anything to do with Dumfries and Galloway, and particularly not family members, really want to admit that the Macmillan story is bogus, that the only piece of contemporary evidence is a single paragraph, repeated in three different newspapers in 1842, reporting that a ‘gentleman from Dumfries-shire’ had been charged and fined for throwing over a child on a velocipede, which describes a machine entirely different from the one that is claimed to be the one ridden by Macmillan, but would fit a tricycle. Not surprisingly, this description is not discussed, but instead we have an entirely fictitious quotation, supposedly from the magistrate, ‘a man riding a machine of two wheels and making it progress without having to touch the ground, I just cannot believe it’. As no record of any part of the trial survives, let alone transcripts of what was said at it, neither can I; presumably it comes from Gordon Irving, whose 1946 ‘history’ of Macmillan was almost entirely fictitious, whom Hurdle has cited without question. In the end this book joins a long list of others in perpetuating a myth that should have been put to bed in the 1890s, but for romantic and patriotic reasons just refuses to die.

Nicholas Oddy