



*Alexander III, 1249-1286:  
First Among Equals*

**Norman Reid**

Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2019

**Review by: Katy Jack**



*Alexander III, 1249-1286: First Among Equals*. By Norman Reid. Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2019. ISBN 978-1-910900-22-2. xiv + 395 pp. £60.

In a review of the 1990 collection *Scotland in the Reign of Alexander III*, edited by Norman Reid, Dauvit Broun praised the chapters contained therein for having finally shed light on a period in Scotland's history that had received remarkably little attention. By using the reign of Alexander III as an anchor, the authors were filling a significant historiographical gap in our understanding of the kingdom's development, whilst addressing the myth of Scotland's "golden age" and the king who is seen to have embodied it. Broun, however, lamented that Reid's discussion of the historiography of the reign did not go far enough, providing only tantalising glimpses of his views on the concepts of kingship, and how Scotland—far from failing to engage with current European thought—was remarkably self-aware. What Reid needed, however, was space to expound his views and in his new book, he gets it.

Reid's long-awaited volume on Alexander III represents the first, serious full-length study of a king whose reputation as a paragon of Scottish kingship has persistently (and sometimes detrimentally) influenced analyses of Scotland in the thirteenth century. Followed as it was by a period of intense political and societal turmoil, the latter half of the thirteenth century in which Alexander III sat on the throne has been mythologised as a "golden age" in Scotland's history, where the strength of both monarchy and kingdom represented an apex in the kingdom's development. While Reid acknowledges that aspects of the reign do "offer glimpses of Scottish medieval society at its best," he warns that by primarily focusing on its "watershed" nature, we are in danger of overlooking the importance of tangible achievements, or of believing that the success of the reign owed solely to the actions of a single man: Alexander III (345-346, 347). Reid's study successfully reinterprets the events of the reign by placing them against a backdrop of at least two centuries of economic, social, and political development that shaped the nature of Scottish kingship and influenced the foundation of the kingdom that Alexander came to inherit. In doing so, Reid not only provides a nuanced (yet balanced) assessment of this popular monarch, but also helps the reader contextualise the achievements of the period.

While the study, by nature of its topic, is monarch-centric, the volume serves a dual purpose of biography and textbook by bookending the discussion of Alexander's reign with chapters that take a more thematic approach and introduce the reader to his kingdom. The first two chapters explore the nature and development of Scottish kingship, providing a concise overview of the events and power shifts that helped to shape the emerging

kingdom from its earliest times to 1249, when Alexander III began his reign. These chapters are particularly important, providing crucial scene setting that enables the reader to understand Scotland as it was when Alexander III succeeded to the throne. The following six chapters represent the core analysis of the reign itself, using a chronological structure to chart the life of the King and explore how his actions (and that of his governing community) showcase a demonstrable awareness of the ideals of European kingship. The final two chapters assess how Scotland functioned in the thirteenth century (focusing on law, administration, economy, climate, and the ideals of medieval monarchy), whilst revisiting the “myth” of Alexander III, providing a welcome appraisal of the man himself and the kingdom over which he ruled. By placing the discussion of these topics at the end of the volume, keeping them separate from the core analysis of Alexander’s reign, the reader is encouraged to reflect on the arguments presented in the previous chapters in anticipation of Reid’s conclusion. It would be easy to extol the virtues of each of these chapters and the myriad insights they provide into a formative period in Scotland’s history. However, there are two sections within Reid’s commanding analysis of the reign that this reviewer feels deserve focused attention.

The first centres on Reid’s emphasis on stability, continuity, and—above all—community. Community is, in fact, the overarching theme that weaves each chapter together. The traditional interpretation of the minority of Alexander III as having been plagued by the interests of warring familial factions—in this case, Durward and Comyn—is convincingly disproved by Reid. His portrayal of a more cohesive administration in the early years of the reign adds much to the growing body of work that questions the idea of “overmighty magnates” in medieval Scotland. Reid does not attempt to dismiss the issues faced by the successive minority governments, but rather encourages the reader to challenge the traditional interpretation and view the minority governments as having had a shared focus on good governance in the absence of an active monarch. Though each of the chapters include references to the overall stability of the governing community both in the minority and during the personal reign of Alexander III, Reid’s views are best expressed in the fourth chapter. Here, Reid illustrates the interplay between the two dominant groups, arguing that while “personal allegiances were fluid, based upon family, business, and other interests which might change or conflict,” their duties as representatives of the king’s authority “transcended these other bonds or rivalries” (141).

The second concerns Reid’s treatment of Scottish policy with regards the disputed territories to the west and the ongoing tension between Scotland and Norway. The discussion, which spans two chapters, is one of the

strongest elements of the volume. As Reid points out, Alexander's reign "was not punctuated by severe threat, disaster, rebellion, or misrule," factors that would have enabled us to better understand the character of the King by assessing his response to a given situation. Consequently, the question of who should possess sovereignty over the Hebrides and the Isle of Man—culminating in the ratification of the Treaty of Perth in 1266—provides a unique opportunity to gain insight into Alexander's ability to conduct himself in the arenas of conflict and diplomacy. The analysis of this period is astute and compelling, but what stands out is Reid's desire to question the established historiographical tradition that the Scottish crown had a right to control these lands, and that this episode in Scotland's history boils down to a king who was fighting to extend his influence. In 1266, he won the right to do so. As Reid argues, the Treaty of Perth was a mutually beneficial agreement that allowed both parties to protect their reputation whilst enhancing their authority; this was not an exercise in domination and conquest, but in the art of "saving face" (196).

In this seminal work, Reid not only challenges traditional interpretations of thirteenth-century Scotland, but also showcases the importance of storytelling to an assessment of a figure who holds pride of place in popular memory. It is no exaggeration to brand this work a triumph of scholarship, and its place on the shelves of scholars and students alike as a crucial work of reference is secured by its masterful treatment of its subject.

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