



*David I:
King of Scots, 1124-1153*

Richard D. Oram

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Review by: Simon Egan



David I: King of Scots, 1124–1153. By Richard D. Oram. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2020. ISBN 978-1-910900-29-1. xviii + 510pp. £80.00.

David I (r. 1124–1153) ranks among Scotland’s most famous kings, and he is often credited with the making of the medieval kingdom. The King’s successes include the building of new burghs in the Lowlands, the extension of royal power into Moray and the western Highlands, the reform of ecclesiastical structures, as well as the introduction and settlement into Scotland of Normans, Flemings, and others from across the Anglo-French world. David’s achievements and the legacy of his apparent successes have, unsurprisingly, generated considerable scholarly interest as well as controversy. Traditionally, scholars have tended to view David as the ‘builder’ king, the monarch who set Scotland on its path towards modernity. Others, by comparison, have stressed the importance of his predecessors, including David’s father Malcolm III (d. 1093), as well as David’s brothers, Edgar (d. 1107), and Alexander (d. 1124) in laying the foundations for David’s later efforts. More recent scholarship, namely the work of Alice Taylor, has challenged many of these well-ingrained ideas about Scottish kingship and underlined the importance of the wider aristocratic community in the shaping of high medieval Scotland.

This new monograph by Richard Oram is a welcome contribution to the debate on one of Scotland’s most prominent historical figures. Indeed, Professor Oram is no stranger to this topic, having previously authored a monograph on King David, *David I: The King Who Made Scotland* (2004), as well as *Domination and Lordship: Scotland, 1070–1230* (2011). It should be noted that Oram’s first biography of David I was met with somewhat of a mixed response. It was praised for its accessibility, but criticised for over-reliance on certain sources and authorities. Running to over five hundred pages, this present volume is an impressive feat of scholarship and incorporates a huge amount of new material, debates, and developments within the field of medieval Scottish historiography.

The first seven chapters serve as a narrative history of David. The first three chapters examine David’s early life. Following the death of Mael Coluim III in 1093 and the election of his brother Domhnall III as King of Scotland, David and his older brothers Edgar and Alexander were forced to flee to England. Oram draws attention to the political and dynastic ties between the Scottish and Norman royal families at this time, focusing in particular on how Scotland’s royal dynasty was drawn closer into the ambit of their southern neighbours.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 delve into David I’s relations with English kings Henry I and Stephen, paying close attention to David’s ambitions and landed interests in northern England. David’s ties with Henry I saw him secure a marriage to the wealthy heiress, Maud de Senlis. With this union, David acquired possession of a vast swathe of lands stretching across northern and north-central England. The acquisition of these lands made David a hugely influential figure within Anglo-Scottish relations. For instance, upon David’s inauguration as King of Scots in 1124, Oram underlines how David used his position to force concessions from King Stephen. Despite being defeated at the Battle of the Standard

in 1138, fears of further Scottish incursions saw Stephen recognise the claims of David's heir, Henry (d. 1152), over Northumbria and Cumbria. Indeed, Scottish claims over the lands would prove an ongoing point of friction between the English and Scottish crowns—one that would not be resolved until 1237.

The remaining eight chapters explore aspects of the King's reign in closer detail. Chapter 8 investigates the development of David's household, focusing on the growth of the King's bureaucracy. Rather than viewing these innovations as "a slavish or stunted emulation of the English model" (217), Oram argues that the growing sophistication of the royal administration was tailor-made to suit prevailing conditions in Scotland: the King carefully blended traditional elements of Scottish kingship with new influences from the Anglo-French world. Chapters 9 and 10 re-visit the so-called 'Anglo-Norman' era in Scottish history in further detail. David's reign, as noted, is often viewed as a revolutionary moment in Scottish history that saw the realm import and engage with the political culture of England, as well as the wider Anglo-French world, on a more active level. Oram does not dispute this but, and drawing upon the recent work of Alice Taylor, argues that David was neither the first king nor the last to engage with newcomers from England and further afield. The idea of an 'Anglo-Norman' era (or the 'reshaping of Scotland,' to use a more helpful and less loaded term) should be viewed as a longer process, one that began in the late eleventh century and lasted well beyond the reign of David I.

Chapter 11 reconsiders David's relations with the 'native' Scottish nobility. Oftentimes, David has been viewed as the king who swept aside the old order and ruthlessly imposed his authority upon Moray and the western seaboard. However, Oram makes clear that the King was careful not to alienate local strongmen. Instead, the King worked with local dynasts to buttress royal power across the kingdom. Chapters 12 and 13 consider David's interaction with the ecclesiastical world, namely the creation of bishoprics, as well as his relations with the monastic orders, while Chapter 14 offers a discussion, by way of a summary, of some of the main historical and historiographical traditions surrounding the memory of David.

The book is replete with helpful maps and genealogical tables, and includes a series of plates depicting historic sites closely associated with David I. The volume also contains a comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography as well as a comprehensive index. Overall, this is a very impressive study. It should be essential reading for anyone working in the area of medieval Scotland, particular on a crucial period which saw the kingdom (for better or worse) drawn more closely into the orbits of England's Norman kings. Likewise, the volume will be of interest to scholars and students who wish to learn more about one of Scotland's most famous kings, as well as those who would like to study the development of Scottish kingship more generally. On a slightly different note, the publishers, Birlinn, have done a fine job in putting together such a beautifully produced book, one that you would very much like to pick up off the shelf. It is a shame though, that it is so expensive at £80.

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