

Ian Mitchell's Scotland-related **BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

11 – *Scotland Reclaimed* – Ritchie

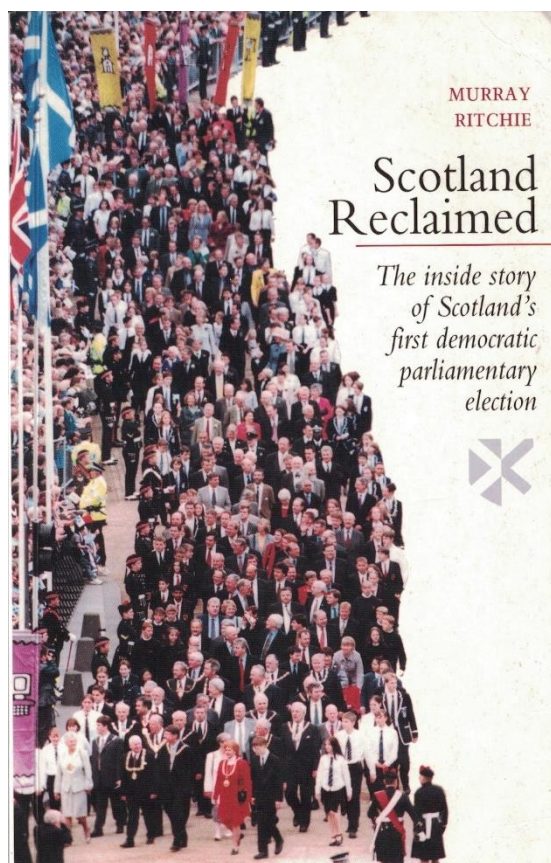
SCOTLAND RECLAIMED: THE INSIDE STORY OF SCOTLAND'S FIRST DEMOCRATIC PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Author: Murray Ritchie

Publication info: Saltire Society, 2000
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

Keywords: Scotland, parliament, independence, general election, Dewar, Salmond, Blair

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 6 July 2018



Reason to read: The only “inside” account of the 1999 general election in Scotland, the first for the new parliament. Published less than a year after the event, this book gives all sorts of hostages to fortune, but is still an interesting account of the ups and downs of the campaign. Those were the days when it was unthinkable that Labour should not run Scotland. Murray Ritchie was the Scottish Political Editor of *The Herald* and, although an independence sympathiser himself, he was a good enough journalist that his account is not unduly distorted by personal views—other than his evident contempt for the Tories, but that I suppose is *de rigueur* for the paler sort of person in post-industrial Glasgow.

Main talking points:

1. The most important point to come out of this book concerns the referendum held fifteen years later. “Most of us came to the view long ago that the Scottish general election is in fact an independence referendum.” (p. 51) “This election is becoming a referendum on independence, exactly what Labour did not want, far less envisage. What is more, *it appears likely to be the pattern of every Scottish general election until the SNP wins one.*” (p. 44) (emphasis added)
2. Ritchie imagines that the only future is European. Writing about Sir Hector Monro’s promotion to “the good life in the opulence of the European parliament” (Ritchie had been the *Herald’s* Brussels correspondent for the previous five years), he says: “Tory anti-Europeanism continues to tear at the heart of the party and its support. Nothing is going to stop Europe continuing the torture of the Conservatives until the moment Britain votes to join the single currency and the matter is settled once and for all.” (p. 188)

3. The Labour Party's obsession with secrecy and control mirrors that of the SNP today. At one point, Ritchie is moved to remark: "We appear to be dealing with a party whose policies are secret." (p.84) Later on, he says, "Donald [Dewar] completes his presentation of Labour's manifesto and a group of party candidates and assorted jobsworths strategically positioned in the room dutifully applaud – at a press conference! There is something slightly North Korean about this." (p. 92)

Thought(s) provoked:

1. The whole story of the ups and downs of the campaign provokes the thought that referendums, like any other form of public balloting, can easily go wrong on the day. In this case, there was a wild swing in the polls between the second-last weekend of the campaign and the last. External events intervened too: public opinion was deeply affected by the NATO bombing of Kosovo. We accept these hazards in general elections because, after all, there are by-elections later, and in less than 5 years another general election. But it seems wrong to expose the historic constitutional structure of the country to such uncertainty and apparent irrationality (neither party's policies changed in the week between the two conflicting pre-election polls). Clearly if the majority of the people really want independence, after a long period during which they have had time to reflect, then it should happen. But it would be gambling to commit the country's future to the hazards of the sorts of swings and roundabouts that are generated by the press-political interaction, and muddied by unreliable poll "findings". All of this is well described by Ritchie.
2. The SNP was, in those distant days, the natural political home of every Scot who hated Tories (for whatever reason) but who also (see "Surprising points" below) could no longer stomach the Labour Party's clannish, bureaucratic oligarchism. They were even less enamoured of its replacement, the ferociously controlling regime of Tony Blair. Ritchie's inside account of New Labour's methods of opinion control is one of the grimly interesting aspects of this book.
3. One wonders what Ritchie *et al* would have thought of the modern Scottish parliament, given that he reports approvingly: "Donald Gorrie is of the old school who believes a parliament and its policies should be guided by its Members and not by a whipped executive." (p. 158)

Incidental interest: The story of the opening of the parliament is worth remembering. The Queen came to Edinburgh for the occasion, as did Sean Connery (not yet knighted) and approximately *no* other celebrities who, apparently at Tony Blair's "suggestion", stayed away, like – *big time*. Then large numbers of SNP MSPs tried to avoid taking the Oath of Allegiance on the irrelevant ground that "the people are sovereign". Ritchie's account of the sanctimony and conceit of the Nationalists (all wearing white roses, apparently) is sick-making. After Donald Dewar swears, "Alex Salmond is next, but before he takes the oath, he makes a little speech making clear that his 'primary loyalty is to the people of Scotland'." (p. 161) Dorothy-Grace Elder even tries to include the words "the people of Scotland" in the oath, but "she is 'advised' by Mike Russell, her party chief executive, to behave properly." (p. 163) Tommy Sheridan, the angry socialist and subsequent perjurer, trumps them all and takes the oath while displaying a raised, if deeply tanned, fist.

Surprising points: It is interesting how often Ritchie refers to the Labour-dominated Council in Glasgow as "Stalinist"—though, as an anti-Labour Nationalist, perhaps that is predictable. Elsewhere he

talks of “the old Strathclyde Soviet style of rule”. (p. 98) But, if Ritchie is right, the main purpose of the weird voting system which was adopted for parliamentary elections (but which almost nobody understood then or today understands) was not to prevent the SNP getting a majority, as most people believe today (SNP spin?), but to keep political debate relatively *open*. “I console myself with the thought,” Ritchie says late in the campaign, “that Labour will probably not win an outright majority. That would be too much. Even some Labour activists are privately saying that they would not want such an outcome at the birth of the much anticipated new democracy. The whole point of adopting this electoral system was to prevent the establishment of another Scottish Labour soviet.” (p. 145)

Negative issue(s): Dullness – not a shred of “Gonzo” journalism, much less of the witty prose of political diarists like Alan Clark, or the fascinating self-absorption of Tony Benn. There are not even any photographs.

Style: Passionless bourgeois Protestant, with a hint of non-Tory self-righteousness

Amusing bit(s): Labour figures return the Nationalist compliment and accuse one journalist who writes sympathetically about the SNP of having “a thistle up his arse.” (p. 139)

Author: Long-time *Herald* journalist, now retired. For a while in the 2000s he was Chair of the Scottish Independence Convention. In July 2017, he wrote: “Is it any wonder the forces for reversing Brexit or at least sending it to a second referendum appear to be getting their act together?”

Link(s): This is Murray Ritchie talking about the referendum in 2014:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3Z1x8ihVBo>

Overall recommendation level: MEDIUM – UNLESS THE 1999 ELECTION IS YOUR THING, IN WHICH CASE HIGHER

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-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. For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>