

## Ian Mitchell's Scotland-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

18 – *Scots and Catalans – Elliott*

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### SCOTS AND CATALANS – Union and Disunion

**Author:** J.H. Elliott

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(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

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**Reviewer:** Ian Mitchell, 30 September 2018



**Reason to read:** A fascinating and informed comparison of the differing histories of Scotland and Catalonia and their relations to Great Britain and Spain, respectively. It focuses on how the two countries have come to be as they are today, in uneasy relationships with their sovereign power. The surprising point is how similar the two narratives have been in the longer term, especially in the mid-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and again since the 1970s. Yet they have also been very different in many ways due to the contrasting fortunes of the two sovereign states of which they are a part. This is comparative history at its most useful. It also has an excellent bibliography.

#### ***Main talking points:***

1. The fundamental dynamic that has emerged in modern times in both Scotland and Catalonia has been the attempt to assert the idea of “legal limited monarchy”. In Britain this arose from the 1688 revolution and the expulsion of the Stuarts from the halls of power and prerogative. In Spain it was first asserted in the mid-nineteenth century when a movement to assert Catalan autonomy—not independence—took root. It was nurtured by a revolt in Cuba—Spain’s last significant colonial possession in the Atlantic world—in 1868, and the war of independence which was lost by Spain in 1898. The metropole needed to reinvent itself. “Catalans were in no doubt that they were the best equipped of all the peoples of Spain to bring this regeneration about. In their eyes, regeneration meant making Spain over in the image of Catalonia, and this in turn required the restoration of the kind of contractual relationship between the ruler and the ruled that had once existed in the Crown of Aragon.” (p. 183)
2. It was also comparatively recently that Scots discovered a pretext for claiming a comparable constitutional tradition. This is the famous Declaration of Arbroath, signed in 1320, which is said to be evidence of the fact Scots have always had a form of contractual monarchy. Though

Professor Elliott does not mention this, it is worth remembering that the *only* condition the Declaration imposed on Scottish rulers was that they defend the country against the English. What he does say is that: “This was a document that dissident Scottish nobles seem not to have invoked [at any time], and that only became generally available when the original Latin text was published in 1680. Even then, it would not be until the twentieth and early twenty-first century that it came to be seen as epitomizing the quintessential Scottish spirit.” (p. 26) He does, however, mention George Buchanan and his arguments for legal limited monarchy, made in the late sixteenth century. The case for judging them opportunistic and historically unsound will be addressed in a future review of *Scots and Britons: Scottish Political Thought and the Union of 1603*.

3. In my view this overstates the case. Declaration of Arbroath is a completely different document than Magna Carta. They were drawn up for completely different reasons: one concerned foreign policy, and the other domestic. As Sir David Edwards, one of Scotland’s most distinguished judges in recent times, has argued, it is the Claim of Right, made in 1688, which should truly be called the “Scottish Magna Carta”. Professor Elliott notes that that document claimed historical authority from no further back than the “political revolution of the 1640s”. (p. 72) No mention then of the now-canonical Declaration!
4. Fake history: Scotland and Catalonia have both invented arguments for disrupting the state they now belong to. For example, Professor Elliott writes about “the success of medieval and sixteenth century Scottish historians in constructing their own ingenious, if largely mythical, narrative of Scotland’s national past. Their construction, however, proved unable to withstand the scrutiny of eighteenth-century scholars. Thomas Inness (1662-1744), a Jacobite whose years in France exposed him to the bracing winds of French historical scepticism, demolished to devastating effect the myths of the ancient Gaelic origins of Scottish constitutionalism.” (p. 169) Mind you, his main source for this is Hugh Trevor-Roper, who is rarely reliable on Scotland, and indeed on anything else beyond witchcraft and Laudian episcopalianism (which some people think are much the same thing).

***Thought(s) provoked:*** My main reaction to this timely comparison of the two movements for greater autonomy is that there is no good cause which parochial politicians are not capable of sully if they scent the possibility utilising it to gain for themselves and their friends some of the power which bigger-time politics denies them. Professor Elliott points out in his closing chapter how similar recent developments in Scotland and Catalonia have been. In Scotland, the generous idea of the Scottish parliament has been demeaned by reducing it to a snake pit of niggardly constitutional sniping. Little constructive gets done. Arguably this is a form of sedition. Murray Ritchie was perceptive on this point: see Main Talking Point #1 in my review of [Scotland Reclaimed](#). Michael Forsyth and Tam Dalziel were right too: devolution cannot work constructively without a properly defined and rigorously enforced structure of subordinate authority of the sort that the United States has for its State legislatures.

***Incidental interest:*** In 1812 Napoleon detached Catalonia from Spain and incorporated it into the French Empire. (p. 143) How very “EU” of him!

Interesting parallels: “Like Edinburgh and Glasgow, nineteenth century Barcelona saw the creation of new social and cultural centres” (p. 156) “It is not surprising that modern Scottish philosophy should have found an appropriate home in Barcelona, where in 1837 it was promoted in the city’s restored

university by its first professor of Ideology and Logic... The empirical doctrines of the Edinburgh School were well calculated to appeal [locally].” (p. 183)

**Surprising points:** Parallel revolts against state power in the 1640s had similar effects but different causes. The Catalan rebellion, like the Portuguese one, aimed at territorial independence. Scots, however, had higher motives. “The cause of religion had little bearing on the origins and evolution of the Catalan revolt but was central to the rebellion in both Scotland and England... The Covenanters were seeking a stronger, not a weaker, union and, unlike the Catalan revolt, there was nothing separatist about their movement. They believed that the abolition of episcopacy and the imposition of the Presbyterian form of church government *throughout the British isles* would do much to strengthen the bonds of affection between its peoples and so establish a closer Anglo-Scottish union.” (p. 55, emphasis added) How very modern of the Covenanters to think that you can make friends by foisting your beliefs on them!

**Negative issue(s):** A slight imbalance in the level of “feel” for the history of his two subject areas. Clearly Spain is Professor Elliott’s major speciality. More than once, he refers to “the Clydeside”!

**Style:** Smooth, but without the human interest which brings history alive.

**Publishing quality:** Good, but not flawless. I noticed several editorial floaters, like “high watermark” rather than “high-water mark” (p. 15).

**Smile(s):** I was amused to read the first description of the Gaudi cathedral in Barcelona which I have ever agreed with: “strange organic shapes and curious excrescences”. (p. 194)

Catalan activists in the media using the weather as a weapon: “Forecasts on Channel 3... covered the western Mediterranean but did not include the Iberian peninsula as a whole, and the weather in Madrid was simply listed alongside that of other major European cities.” (p. 242)

What’s new? “In a famous leading article of 4 December 1856, *The Times* unkindly described Scotland as ‘manifestly a country in want of a grievance’.” (p.179)

**Author:** Sir John Elliott is the Regius Professor Emeritus of Modern History at Oxford University

**Link(s):** You can see a film of Sir John [talking informally about Spanish history at this link](#). He explains his point that Spain was originally a composite kingdom assembled from diverse national components, in Iberia, elsewhere in Europe (Sicily, the Netherlands, etc.) and in the Americas. It was not, in the Roman or Russian sense, an *empire*. This, of course, has major implications for Catalonia today.

**Overall recommendation level:** HIGH, especially in the context of Brexit and other referendums.

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**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](mailto:ianbookrec@gmail.com). For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>