

NORTHERN NEIGHBOURS

FOREWORD

By Tom M Devine

The comparative approach is one of the most useful in the intellectual toolkit of the historian. It enables the scholar to determine what is distinctive and what is commonplace about the country he or she is primarily interested in studying. It encourages an analytical rather than a descriptive discourse as questions, paradoxes, problems and puzzles arise which would otherwise remain hidden or dormant without such a broader context of investigation. The pitfalls of exceptionalism, introspection, parochialism and navel-gazing in national histories can be avoided to some extent at least. Invaluable also is the fact that some features which domestic historians take for granted can often immediately seem striking and intriguing to the outsider.

The historiography of modern Scotland has already benefited significantly from the approach. In the final three decades of the last century a series of conferences, followed by publication of their proceedings, was organised to explore the comparative historical development of Ireland and Scotland. At the heart of the discussions was a central issue. Around 1700 the social, economic, resource and demographic contours of both countries seemed probably similar. Indeed, there was some evidence that Ireland showed more promise of material progress than Scotland. Instead, however, Scotland experienced rapid industrialisation from the middle decades of the eighteenth century and eventually a position of global economic hegemony while Ireland's tragic fate culminated in the horrors of the Great Famine, the most terrible human catastrophe in nineteenth-century Europe. Scholars on both sides of the Irish Sea learned much about the causes and nature of the development paths of the two societies until the project finally came to an end more than a decade or so ago.

Now in this important book we can read another exciting attempt to examine through the comparative lens the modern histories of Norway and Scotland. A team of interdisciplinary experts drawn from both countries and elsewhere in the UK have been assembled to consider the radically different historical paths of two small nations and the social, political and economic consequences from c. 1800 to the present day.

As in the Irish case, before 1700 the similarities between the two were much more obvious than the contrasts. Both were relatively poor by the standards of contemporary England, France and Holland and practised a mainly subsistence form of agriculture in peasant communities with broadly similar endowments and challenges of land and climate. Each had experienced the full ideological and political impact of the Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century, in the Scottish case rooted in Calvinism, in the Norwegian, Lutheranism.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the social and economic structures of both countries were diverging rapidly. Scotland's economic revolution in both manufacturing and agriculture was the fastest in Europe until forced Soviet industrialisation in the 1930s. It led to massive urbanisation, displacement of population and communities in the rural worlds of both Highlands and Lowlands, huge levels of internal migration and emigration, and eventually to a capitalist system of extraordinary material power feeding markets across the globe for ships, locomotives, steel, iron, engineering products and numerous other commodities. Norway's economic development was by contrast much less disruptive, more protracted and more benign, not least for the people of the countryside. Industry was less concentrated than in Scotland, a process aided by hydro-electricity as the

power source rather than coal, which tended to localise population in areas of the best resources. The contributors to the book skilfully draw out the reasons for these different development paths while at the same time demonstrating convincingly that they have moulded the politics, social structures and popular cultures of Norway and Scotland down to the present.

This is, then, a fascinating study of comparative history. But it is much more than that. The historical background leads into pertinent assessments of how far in this year of the Scottish Referendum the much-vaunted 'Nordic Model' of higher taxation and a more potent welfare state is actually fit for purpose in Scotland given the radically different historical formations of the two countries. Here the volume contributes effectively not only to an understanding of the past but also to an important aspect of the constitutional and public policy debates of today and into the future.