
*The expression of power in a medieval
kingdom: thirteenth-century
Scottish castles*

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There can be fewer more potent images of a power centre in the popular mind than the late medieval castle. Easily visible for miles around, its lofty stone curtain walls served to protect and overawe, providing, indeed, both the means and the expression of power and lordship. Introduced to England by the Norman supporters of Edward the Confessor in the eleventh century, the castle "as a fortified home and military base",² was one of the main factors in bringing about the permanent conquest of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom by William I. As the centres of fiefs granted out to the new king's supporters, castles also played an important role in administration. Originally built of wood, sometimes with stone foundations, but becoming more usually wholly constructed in masonry by the twelfth century, these early Norman castles took the form of either a motte and bailey or a "ringwork". The latter probably differed little from their Saxon predecessors in terms of form, but these Norman castles certainly served a different function in the new political and social environment.

Although castle building was a crucial element in establishing William's control over his new kingdom, nevertheless, in succeeding

centuries the castle also posed a threat to the crown as a key element in rebellion. During the civil war between Stephen and the Empress Matilda, for example, one chronicler writes dolefully that "In England there were as many kings, or rather tyrants, as there were lords of castles".³ The terror factor, in favour of either individual lords or the crown itself, was clearly an important feature of these English castles.

But what about Scotland? Overtly "feudal" land tenure (in the sense of a fief held of the crown explicitly for military service) was introduced to the northern kingdom by David I in the twelfth century and was again accompanied by the construction of wooden motte-and-bailey castles by both crown and nobility. The suggestion that there was a form of "Norman conquest" of Scotland has been argued from the above innovations and also the growing presence of Anglo-Normans, friends of the king, who were granted fiefs throughout the country, but most particularly in "sensitive" areas, i.e. those parts most resistant to royal authority, such as Galloway and Moray. There can be no doubt that the construction of these castles, either royal or noble, was intended, just like the English ones in the previous century, to extend and enhance royal authority, directly or indirectly.

But in what ways did these wooden castles serve to magnify the power and authority of their owners, and ultimately of the crown? The evidence suggests that the actual structures were far from invincible: in the Galwegian revolt of 1174 "all the defences and castles which the king of Scotland had established in their land they besieged, captured and destroyed".⁴ Since it is unlikely that the Galwegians practised advanced siege techniques, then the vulnerability of the wooden towers to fire must surely have been a crucial factor, together, perhaps, with an inability on the part of their owners to garrison and supply them sufficiently. These castles were also not so sophisticated that they required vast resources to build them; in 1185, for example, Roland, grandson of Fergus of Galloway, was able to engage on a castle-building programme on his own behalf.

Yet surely these Scottish mottes were of a similar structure to the English mottes which played such a vital role in the Norman conquest? Why, therefore, were they initially unable, in Galloway at least, to impose royal authority? Part of the answer may lie in Moray, which had also long proved a thorn in the side of the kings of Scots. The death of its last mormaer, Angus, in revolt in 1130 brought the area directly under direct royal jurisdiction, although in practice the authority of the crown was still limited. In the following century the coastal, low-lying part of the province was divided into four or five administrative units based on the royal burghs and castles of Elgin, Forres, Auldearn, Nairn, and Inverness. The formation of these secular administrative units was accompanied by

the establishment of monastic houses which similarly helped to engender conformity. Thus, although there was further rebellion in Moray after 1130, this obvious royal presence entailed the blurring of the distinctiveness of the region until it became part of Scotia.⁵

Galloway ultimately succumbed to the centralising tendencies of the MacMalcolm dynasty in a similar fashion when the native male line died out in the thirteenth century. The three heiresses were each then married to an Anglo-Norman and Galloway was administered through their great fiefs. The castle again played an important role as the centre of these fiefs: Buittle for John Balliol; Cruggleton for Roger de Quincy; Annan, and later Lochmaben (just outside Galloway), for Robert Bruce. The important point to be deduced from these examples is that the castle acted as a focus for, and means of, the consolidation of authority only when there was no united and determined opposition. It was thus an expression of power, in the first instance, not the means of it.

With the introduction of stone castles into Scotland from the late twelfth century, these expressions of power became much less equivocal as their vulnerability to attack decreased. Prevailing fashions in defensive architecture, such as the development of the great stone donjon [keep], flanking towers, and the heavily fortified gatehouse, were evident by the end of the thirteenth century in a highly sophisticated form. As the intrinsic strength of the castle structure increased in leaps and bounds, so the necessity for relying on the defensive capabilities of the site itself decreased, thus partly explaining why later builders often abandoned the sites of the earlier mottes.

This general (but far from complete) abandonment of more ancient sites in preference for starting from scratch was not the pattern in England where earlier motte-and-bailey structures were rebuilt and adapted in stone. This difference is explained partly by the fact that Scottish kings and their nobility had never engaged in castle building on quite the scale of their southern neighbours and thus there was plenty of scope for new sites. However, the more interesting implication of these thirteenth-century Scottish stone castles is that their owners clearly had sufficient leisure and resources to indulge in the creation of edifices which were pre-eminent in scale and sophistication in Britain at the time and would not have looked out of place on the continent. Dirleton, Kildrummy, and Bothwell, in particular, owed much to French models, notably the great Coucy-le-Château, built by Enguerrand de Coucy, father of Alexander II's queen, Marie, and all testify to the wealth and self-confidence of their builders.

These castles conform to a pattern which was later described as "Edwardian", after the king of England who employed this type of military architecture to such great effect in Wales. However, it should already

be evident, and must be stated again quite unequivocally, that the Scottish castles which conformed to the "Edwardian" type were built before the great Welsh castles and looked primarily to the French, rather than the English, for influence.

In addition, there was no rule governing who produced the best results, or where they were located. The builder might equally well be of Anglo-Norman, native Celtic, or Norse stock and the castle constructed in any part of Scotland. This should give us pause to consider the changes in Scottish society over the previous century and a half. While the "Anglo-Norman" knights introduced mainly by David I were certainly intended to act as policemen for royal authority in "problem" areas and were undoubtedly resented by the native "Celtic" nobility, they cannot be regarded as anything other than Scottish by the mid-thirteenth century and are thus no more or less representative of attitudes to royal authority than any other Scottish noble.⁶

There may, however, be a common factor governing why these sophisticated stone castles were built, namely a desire to impress or overawe in the face of insecurity or even a perceived threat, real or imaginary: the splendour of Kildrummy served to reinforce a perception of wealth, status, and power on behalf of the "Celtic" earl of Mar, a royal supporter, in the face of continuing hostility to central government in neighbouring Moray; Caerlaverock, dominating the northern bank of the Solway with a fine view over Cumberland, was regarded by Henry III of England as a provocative gesture, together with Hermitage on the eastern border; Bothwell, in Lanarkshire, was built by a major landowner of the north-east who had only recently acquired the estate; Dirleton was probably founded by a man who had also only recently been granted the lands on which the castle was situated. It would be overstating the case to suggest that any of these lords were overtly aggressive, but they certainly seem to have been keen to advance themselves. None, with the exception of the earl of Mar, were in the top rank of the Scottish nobility.

This assertiveness therefore begs a further question. It may have been noted that in the above description of early-thirteenth-century stone castles there has not been, thus far, any reference to royal castles. Indeed the latter appear to contradict many of the above statements in that sites which had been inhabited from time immemorial because of their strategic importance – most obviously, Dumbarton, Stirling, and Edinburgh – continued to operate as the seats of royal government. Newer sites which had accompanied the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in Scotland, often as the centres of sheriffdoms – Roxburgh, Elgin, Forres, Dumfries, Kirkcudbright, Forfar, Ayr, Berwick, Inverness, Peebles, Perth, Selkirk, etc. – also continued in use, gradually transforming themselves from wood to stone. That is not meant to imply that there were no impressive royal castles –

Roxburgh, in particular, springs to mind as a large and imposing edifice and Edinburgh was quite capable of playing host to the festivities surrounding the signing of the Treaty of Perth. A suitable setting was still required in which to conduct the affairs of state. The point is, however, that very few appear to have exhibited the striking state-of-the-art features which characterised some noble castles of the thirteenth century. Even more importantly, the castles where the kings of Scots chose to spend most of their time were often quite the opposite: the remains of the royal castle at Forfar, for example, are currently enclosed within the back garden of an average town house!

It would be tempting to suggest, therefore, that the bold and expensive residences constructed by members of the nobility, which contrast sharply with the piecemeal upgrading of royal castles, lends credence to the traditional picture of over-mighty nobles challenging the Scottish monarchy in power and prestige. Indeed, we might almost expect that the earlier quotation regarding the English nobility during Stephen's reign must be equally valid for Scotland, even without the aid of a civil war.

Alas, such an attractive interpretation does not withstand even a cursory investigation of the evidence. There was rebellion in Scotland, even in the reign of Alexander III, but it is clear that such challenges to royal authority related to specific issues and were perpetrated by individuals or very small groups of nobles. The position of the MacMalcolm kings was no longer one of those issues, except in the north-west, and that was dealt with in 1263. The lack of attention paid to royal castles as status symbols must therefore be regarded as a sign that there was no need for such overt displays of power. These were working residences whose form was dictated by the requirements of administration and the pleasures of the hunt. If there was any need for overawing, the king was quite happy to allow his nobility to do it for him, whether in the direction of the king of England or the men of Moray.

This argument can be taken further. It has already been noted that these exemplary builders were not, with one exception, members of the highest echelons of the nobility either. It is, at first glance, difficult to explain why the "Celtic" earls of Lennox, Menteith, and Fife, for example, did not follow the earl of Mar in building castles indicative of their ancient status, without degenerating into an untenable argument which assumes that they had neither the resources nor political standing to engage in such enterprises. Certainly these earls, like the king, are likely to have resided on sites which had a long history of occupation but which could be described as castles by the thirteenth century: Lennox held Dumbarton until he lost it to the crown in 1238;⁷ Menteith may well have constructed an early castle at Doune.⁸ However, it is even more aston-

ishing to consider why the "new" leading nobility, such as the Bruces, the Comyns, and the Balliols, who certainly built stone residences, were also not responsible for the most spectacular and costly Scottish castles. There can be no question of their political clout nor, surely, of their economic wealth in comparison to the Maxwell owner of Caerlaverock, for example.⁹ Again, we must assume that political and social prestige was in no sense bound up with the building of grand "modern" fortifications. If the current construction was working well enough, why change it? If it was not, small-scale adaptations would suffice. This also suggests that there was no need to keep particularly up-to-date with techniques of military architecture, presumably because there was insufficient military threat to inspire such expenditure. The Balliol family certainly preferred to spend their money on more esoteric architecture, such as Sweetheart Abbey and the eponymous college at Oxford.

It would be unwise to say any more about contemporary attitudes in Scotland towards the castle as a status symbol. However, it should be quite clear that the evidence suggests that the monarchy, in conjunction with the higher nobility, exerted power in a relaxed and self-confident manner, husbanding its resources with increasing sophistication but not expending it unnecessarily. Though power in Scotland might be regarded as under-stated, it was none the less very real.

Having given a description of the role of the castle in establishing and consolidating the power of crown and nobility on a national level, it is now necessary to be more specific about exactly how that power was exercised and how this related to the surrounding environment. Given that documentary evidence from the thirteenth century exists in any meaningful way primarily in the form of the chamberlain's and Exchequer rolls and the occasional *Regesta*, and thus refers only to royal castles or those noble castles currently held by the crown, this source naturally provides evidence for the exercise of royal authority. However, it can also be asserted that many of the activities engaged in and through royal castles, and the means whereby they operated, are equally valid for noble establishments.

The royal castle was overseen by either a constable or sheriff, responsible for its upkeep and administration. Constables had been men of high rank, such as Gervase Avenel, lord of Eskdale, in the twelfth and early thirteenth century, but, by Alexander III's reign, they do not seem to have been so eminent, nor so common. Indeed, by the latter half of the thirteenth century, the scarcity of references to constables in the accounts has led one scholar to suggest that most royal castles were, in fact, staffed for most of the time by little more than a gate-keeper (*portarius*), who is also named as janitor in the records.¹⁰ Certainly in the accounts for the reign of Alexander III, payment is made to a constable only at Inverkoych.

Aberdeen was manned by a watchman, a crossbowman, and a chaplain, Kintore by a janitor, Inverness by a chaplain, and Ayr by a crossbowman, two watchmen, and a gate-keeper.¹¹

However, the royal castle was not left completely undefended. Unfortunately, since the duty of castle ward or garrison duty was an obligation required of local landowners, it does not appear in royal records and thus it is impossible to work out exactly how many men formed the military garrison. This obligation also permitted the crown to use the manpower of local estates in building work and repair and gave most major landowners some interest in the royal administration of their own area.

The royal castle was thus staffed by a small core of resident officials, with the added security of the service of local knights in the garrison. However, by the mid-thirteenth century castle-guard appears to have fallen into abeyance or else, as with many other obligations, it had been converted into a cash payment, rather than the actual provision of men, which revenue then went straight to the crown. This is implied by the fact that in times of potential crisis – such as when the king of Norway arrived on the west coast in 1263 – the garrisons of a number of castles had to be reinforced by soldiers paid for by the sheriff. Royal burghs also had an obligation to pay for men to serve in the local castle, although by Alexander III's reign this too was an unusual demand, however legitimate.¹² If castle-guard was not regularly insisted upon, this was surely because the security of royal castles was not usually threatened.

The lack of references to constables by the late thirteenth century suggests that most royal castles were looked after and administered by the sheriff. Since these sheriffs, as members of the higher nobility, presumably had castles of their own, furnished to their specific requirements, it is likely that they were rarely resident in royal castles.

By the late thirteenth century there were around twenty-five sheriffdoms in Scotland, most, but not all, of which had a royal castle at its centre. Some, like Selkirk, were hereditary; others were usually within the orbit of particular families, especially the Comyns. The sheriffs themselves were some of the most influential men in each particular locality and often in the kingdom. This illustrates that Scottish government now relied on close co-operation between the crown and the higher nobility. In England, on the other hand, sheriffs were members of the lesser nobility, men who might be described as embryonic civil servants, in that they owed their power and position primarily to their office. Which system evolves out of weakness: the one which allows the highest men in the land to act as "the arm of the king within the shire" or the one which appoints those "with the wealth to support their office, but not rich enough to act with any degree of independence"?¹³

The sheriff was certainly a key player in the administration of the

kingdom. Whether or not the inhabitants of each sheriffdom regarded royal authority as a welcome force for stability or an undesirable intrusion, the sheriff sitting in the royal castle cannot have failed to remind them that the king of Scots was none the less their overlord. As the crown's representative the sheriff was responsible for the collection of revenue from land in royal hands and feudal casualties. He then passed on to the king whatever remained once he had paid out all the expenses associated with the upkeep and administration of the sheriffdom and what was owed to any ecclesiastical institution as a result of royal grants. He also executed royal writs, which could vary in scope from matters of national importance to an investigation of a particularly local problem.

The sheriff was also responsible for royal justice, both civil and criminal, in the locality, which included the arresting of wrongdoers and their safe-keeping within the castle.¹⁴ However, although the sheriff was an innovation, many attributes of an older, non-feudal system of justice were still to be found in thirteenth-century Scotland, including the payment of "wergeld", that is, compensation in cattle according to the severity of the crime and the status of the wronged individual. Thus the sheriff of Ayr had to "entertain" in his castle the son of Gilaverianus, farmer of the Cumbraes, in 1266 as hostage for the payment of a fine of fourscore cows.¹⁵ It should not be presumed that the introduction of an ostensibly feudal structure fundamentally altered the existing administrative forms. In many cases, it was just a question of renaming. Thus, although the castle and its sheriff undoubtedly symbolised the increasing effectiveness of royal power after the introduction of Norman elements to Scottish society, the administration of that power still contained much with which the native population was quite familiar. This familiarity also no doubt rendered innovation more acceptable.

It would also be foolish to assert that the authority of the crown and its officers was unchallenged; though the inclusion of a number of the nobility in royal administration might be regarded as a carrot, the stick was often required to bring others into line. The sheriff of Fife, for example, found it impossible to collect a fine imposed on Duncan, a nephew of the earl of Fife, because the latter owned no goods or property in his sheriffdom which could be confiscated. It was requested that the sheriff of Perth, in whose sheriffdom Duncan did have effects, should distrain him instead.¹⁶ This is perhaps merely an example of youthful waywardness, but might also indicate hints of independence on the part of an ancient Celtic noble family against royal authority exercised, in this case, by a member of a lesser Fife family.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the administrative network was firmly established throughout most of the kingdom and the profits of justice both from sheriffs and the senior law officers, the three justiciars, were a considerable source of revenue for the crown,

second only to the income from crown lands.

In theory at least, every free man could present a petition to the royal officer, airing his grievances. The use made of the castle by the sheriff for the giving of justice potentially affected every member of the local community, from the settling of land disputes to the disposal of the goods and chattels of executed criminals.

The system had obvious drawbacks since the sheriff was often the dominant landowner in the area and thus not necessarily sympathetic to the complaints of tenants, large or small. However, we should not forget that in the closely-knit communities of the Middle Ages the accepted and expected execution of good lordship in the realm of justice was a vital feature of government at all levels. This obligation, which required the superior to protect those below him in both peace and war, differentiates the medieval landed élite from later, more commercially motivated, landlords who might also hold local office and who did, or did not, exhibit a paternalistic attitude towards those within his orbit. All medieval landowners were expected to fulfil this obligation (which is not the same as saying that they always did so) because society as a whole regarded its fulfilment as integral to its structure and well-being.

The medieval castle played a pivotal role in facilitating the smooth running of the justice system. Prisoners had to be housed securely within its walls in accommodation related to status, as, presumably, did those who were required to give evidence, perhaps some of the friends of the defendant who had agreed to act as pledges for him/her, the attendant clerks and officials of the court, and the jury – not strictly numbering twelve in Scotland – comprising those members of the local élite who were regarded as most “sufficient” to judge the case in hand. In the evening the great hall would function as an enlarged dining hall, and later as a sleeping area for those not worthy of individual accommodation; the following morning it would then become the court room itself. If a sentence of execution was subsequently passed, the criminal would then be taken from the castle via a road often leading straight from it to the gallows, this last journey for the convicted criminal providing a suitably entertaining, but nevertheless cautionary, public spectacle. There is every reason to believe that a similar scenario operated in noble castles during the holding of baronial courts.

The important element in all of the above is the public nature of the proceedings – justice required not only to be done, it had to be seen to be done. The following example illustrates the local community's expectations clearly. In 1302, when Edward I's forces occupied Lothian and the Borders, the English sheriff of Roxburgh wrote to the king regarding the prosecution of certain thieves in the area. Although he was part of a military regime, Sir Robert Hastangs, the sheriff, was aware that the best

method of effecting control throughout the sheriffdom was to administer justice successfully. The capture of these miscreants was undertaken with the help of the English warden of neighbouring Selkirk forest, who, after their capture, claimed them and their ransoms as prisoners of war. The sheriff, however, stated that "they are common and notorious thieves and have made such riot in the county that the people told him that they expected him to clear them out." He went on to warn that they should be returned to prison at Roxburgh "or he will find no man in the county willing to obey him after his authority had been defied".¹⁸

As a final indication of the interest of Scottish society as a whole in the maintenance of stability through justice, the role of the monarch was profoundly associated with his active participation in this subject. Thus the mass of people already thronging the castle, and particularly its great hall, during court sessions, would be increased considerably on the occasions when the king himself arrived to administer justice personally.

The effect of such visits on the local community was fundamental in two important aspects: the local populace could enter into a much closer relationship with their king than a royal progress might otherwise have allowed for – in giving justice he was taking an active part in their lives; secondly, the economic effect of the royal household in residence, for however short a period, must have had a similar impact on the medieval community as the holding of the Olympics on a modern city – desirable in the creation of jobs and as an opportunity to effect renovation and new building programmes, but liable to create a corresponding hole in the local economy on departure. In 1264, for example, Alexander spent over six months in residence at Forfar castle, which seems to have been a favourite haunt of the thirteenth-century kings of Scots. During that time the king's household consumed "48 oxen, 25 swine from the adjacent forest, 30 sheep brought from Barry, and 40 from the Grange of Strathylif (now Glenisla), 60 stone of cheese, 311 fowls, 17 chalders 1.5 bolls of malt, 3 chalders 2 bolls of barley, and 38 chalders 7 bolls of fodder", and this did not include the special provision for the queen, whose household was separate from her husband's. The pond at Cluny, a vital component of the castle's resources, produced a total of 880 eels for both households.¹⁹ Sixteen barrels of wine were brought in from Dundee to Forfar.

Members of the local population were able to make use of this potential market through casual labour, including the boy employed to walk with the king's horses, and the man who carried peats into the tower of the castle, and through payment for extra goods and services, such as providing fodder for oxen. On the other hand, the presence of so many demanding mouths may well have caused resentment among those farming the crown demesne lands at least, since the sheriff was no doubt extremely zealous in the collection of royal dues, as witnessed by the fact

that much greater care was taken over accountancy during a royal visit.²⁰

Forfar castle underwent some refurbishment as a result of Alexander's stay: the roofs of several houses were repaired with lead bought to make a new vat in the kitchen; sash-windows were stopped up temporarily with towels from the chapel and canvas bought to hang above the altar. Glass, which had to be imported, may have been a normal feature of the top rank of thirteenth-century castles but repair of a broken pane might well have entailed a wait of several months, during which time such temporary measures, though perhaps undesirable, were clearly unavoidable.²¹

In servicing the needs of royal households, which could vary in number from that of the king alone, when a young man, to that of the king, the queen, the heir to the throne, and other royal progeny, together with embassies from abroad and a mixed-bag of courtiers, the royal castle presided over an economic network extending over its broader environment. In the thirteenth century, this network encompassed the royal burgh, if appropriate, neighbouring royal forests and ponds, the royal lands of the area, and a number of royal manors and other buildings which acted as grain stores and collection points.

These last establishments were very important since a large percentage of rent was still paid in kind – oats, wheat, barley, malt, fodder, cattle, swine, sheep, poultry, and dairy products. The crown therefore still usually lived off its own and required to purchase only more specialised products, such as spices and fine cloth, much of which would have come from abroad. It was therefore necessary to store grain in particular over a long period in places which could service the royal residences easily.

The crown lands of eastern Scotia which provided the royal staple diet were often divided up into thanages, managed – not owned – by thanes. These royal²² factors did not tend to hold the office for long, implying that they were landowners themselves elsewhere. One of their main duties in peace time was the collection of pre-feudal dues and services, such as cane and conveth, which, by the thirteenth century, might have been paid in kind if the king was expected to stay in the area, or in cash, if not. By the thirteenth century also, many sheriffs had taken over the functions of the thane, even if the thanage itself survived as a land unit. Thanages were also fermed out, often to magnates, for a fixed rate, while the surviving thanes put pressure on the crown to give them similar status to "Norman" incomers, including hereditary rights.²³

The farming out of royal lands, which thus provided a regular cash income, was clearly of immediate benefit to the granter, though there was a limit to the amount of land which could safely be granted away, if an effective power base was to be maintained. Alexander III had clearly realised the benefits of feu-farming and at the least wished to continue its

use, if not to expand it in 1266 payment was made to the chamberlain, who was visiting the sheriffdoms of Inverness and Nairn in order "to place the king's lands in ferme".²⁴ It is, unfortunately, not clear whether these lands were already leased out, or whether this was an innovation.

The expansion of feu-ferming implies an attempt to maximise resources through an increasingly sophisticated exploitation of surplus produce. In other words, the crown was able to give up certain parts of its demesne lands and the food provided by it in return for hard cash because supply exceeded royal demand. Hard cash could then be used for the purchase of luxury goods, improving both royal comfort and image. The fact that money, not men, was owed to the crown under this form of tenure also implies that the king of Scots considered the current state of the Scottish war machine to be sufficient and it is an abuse of hindsight to suggest that he should have seen the need to develop it. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the wars with England after Alexander III's death meant that Scotland's military potential did then require to be more fully exploited; these wars, together with the difficult economic conditions of the following century, cut short the prospect of any economic benefit to the country as a whole, and the crown in particular, accruing from the extension of feu-ferming at this stage.

That was the future, however. In general, the population of thirteenth-century Scotland, as elsewhere in Europe, was concerned with feeding its ever expanding numbers. One method of accomplishing this was to bring under the plough land which had previously been regarded as unsuitable for food production. Thus, for example, two free tenants reclaimed waste lands in the sheriffdom of Traquair under the steelbow system of cultivation, whereby they received half a chalder of barley, a chalder of fodder, and a horse; another group of free tenants in the same sheriffdom were charged grassums for their entry into the waste lands of certain bondsmen for a five-year period.²⁵ It requires no leap of the imagination to postulate that cultivation of land by serfs will certainly not lead to good husbandry practices. The last example suggests that thanages were not alone in being granted out in ferme. Nor was land the only resource to be fermed: mills, peat-moors, lakes, and the collection of dues were all granted out in this way, presumably with the intention of maximising the profits to the crown.²⁶

Forests were another important component of this economic network, though the term refers to an area of land over which the owner had rights of free forestry – i.e. complete control – and which was not necessarily wooded. Most royal castles were situated near a forest, where deer, boar, swine, fox, rabbit, wild cat, marten, and hare were all sustained, ready for the hunt. The local tenantry could be granted permission to use it, for grazing their own animals, for example, on payment of a toll such as

foggage, pannage, or herbage.²⁷ The foresters who looked after the area were often men of substance,²⁸ responsible for making sure that no trespass was committed and accounting for the revenues of these tolls.

Thus, although the castle performed an obvious administrative function, it had an equally important role in a much more sociable context. The medieval kings of Scots generally had one thing in common: their love of the hunt. Thus the popular royal castles were patronised so frequently because of their suitability for this activity, rather than for their defensive capabilities. Most of the building work commissioned in the accounts for the reign of Alexander III related to hunting activities: the construction of a new park or chase at Stirling, the most popular royal abode, and the repair of the old one; the enclosure of the wood and meadows at Jedburgh by a hedge and ditch; the building of another new park at Kincardine. Payments were also made to a variety of officers connected with hawking and field sports – fox-hunters, keepers of the rabbit-warrens, those employed to look after the hawks and the royal dogs.²⁹ This economic and sociable, rather than military, emphasis governing the form of royal residences is finally illustrated by the fact that one of Scotland's most successful kings – Robert I – much preferred living in his manor house at Cardross and indeed decided that he could do without many royal castles, casting down their walls to deprive the enemy of a stronghold.

The castles of the Scottish nobility operated in much the same way as their royal counterparts, as centres of administration, including justice and estate management, and recreation and entertainment. They were equally the heart of economic networks encompassing demesne lands, forests, and waterways. This was particularly true in the north-west, where a plethora of stone castles – not Bothwells or Kildrummys certainly, but impressive nonetheless – had existed since the late twelfth century. Indeed Castle Sween, in Mid-Argyll, is particularly significant not only because it was the first curtain-wall castle in Scotland, but also because it was comparatively sophisticated.³⁰ Having established that the kingdom of Scotland, under the king's leadership, was developing the economic exploitation of its resources, it could well be the case that the north-west was far richer than has previously been considered. Certainly the climatic changes evident from the fourteenth century, which may have forced the retreat of certain types of tree cover from the western Highlands due to wetter conditions,³¹ might also have subsequently induced an overly pessimistic view of the economic potential of the area. Nevertheless, it is unfortunately the case that a coherent economic analysis of the north-west in the medieval period, which would aid considerably a discussion of why there were so many stone castles in the area so early, is not yet a reality.

It is stating the obvious to reiterate that the people of the north-western Highlands were reliant on, and exploitative of, the many waterways which form such an obvious physical feature of the west coast. These placed its inhabitants in much closer proximity to each other – whilst remaining remote from most of the rest of Scotland – than many of those residing in the other mountainous part of Scotland, the north-east. Contact with Ireland, of course, and the rest of the west coast of Britain was also comparatively easy. The precise social implications of this paradox have no place here, but the one important factor for our purposes is that it was much easier to transport goods, particularly heavy commodities such as stone, over water than land in the Middle Ages. It is no coincidence, therefore, that all the thirteenth-century north-western castles stood on the shore of sea, river or loch, reflecting more than one practical advantage. Building in stone might never be cheap, but in this area it was not particularly difficult. The early seafaring lords of Argyll were in a prime position to take on board influences, including castle-building techniques, from a number of sources, including Scotland itself, but also England and Scandinavia. Denmark, for example, had experienced a great castle-building programme, using brick and stone, under King Valdemar in the late twelfth century.³² While much of the function of these western castles, as with their lowland counterparts, was related to administration, the desire of those in the north-west to maintain their semi-autonomous position against either Scotland or Norway must also have been a factor in their construction. Thus, when considering the *raison-d'être* behind these numerous, significant west-coast castles, it would perhaps be more relevant to replace "why?" with "why not?".

With regard to the nobility in general in the thirteenth century, it would certainly not be surprising if they, like the king, sought to enrich themselves by taking advantage of a period of expanding population causing increased grain prices and low labour costs. It is likely – but the scarcity of thirteenth-century evidence does not permit much more than speculation – that the nobility also attempted to advance the economic potential of their lands by feu-farming long before such a form of land-holding came to be viewed as particularly desirable.

The earls of Lennox might be regarded as members of a fairly typical noble family who, while not in the forefront of Scottish politics in the same way as the Comyn earls of Buchan, for example, were none the less vital to effective royal government. They had also probably performed such a role well before the Normans came to Scotland.³³ As with all other members of the nobility, the exercise of their administrative duties was primarily associated with their castle or castles. The principal seat of the earls of Lennox until the early thirteenth century was, of course, the magnificent rock fortress at Dumbarton, until the crown realised its

importance and took it for itself. The main residence then moved to Balloch, although it is likely that such a site, in the middle of good hunting country and much closer to the heart of the Lennox, would have often played host to the earl and his family prior to that date. A natural mound surrounded by a ditch is all that remains of the castle at Balloch, though it has been alleged that a causeway leading to a bridge or drawbridge was found when the moat was drained in the last century. The thirteenth-century earls of Lennox also appear to have had a residence at Fintry, judging from the number of charters granted there. In 1238 Alexander II confirmed the earldom of Lennox to Maldovine, the current holder, granting us a glimpse of the kind of authority which each great landowner wielded in his own domains. The grant is written in an entirely feudal language, much of which would have been regarded as obsolete and meaningless in thirteenth-century England. Thus Earl Maldovine was to hold Lennox "in fee and heritage, in wood and plain, on land and sea, in meadow-land and pasture-land, in moor and marsh, in ponds and mills". He thus had control over all the physical aspects of the land within his jurisdiction, from the arable and grazing land to the woods and fisheries, and could thus regulate all the activities of those living in the area. The charter then goes on to describe the more intangible, but "none the less vital, elements of the earl's authority: sake and soke, pit and gallows, toll and team and infangdtheff".³⁴ Together, these rights of jurisdiction, which had originally been held by the more wealthy Anglo-Saxon thegns of pre-Conquest England, were fundamental to post-Conquest society.³⁵ They provided the grantee with complete control over the judicial process within the estate, with the exception of certain crimes, such as treason, which were reserved to the crown.

The jurisdictional rights encompassed by Earl Maldovine's charter carried with them the satisfaction of accepted practice. Given the lack of early estate papers, indications of such practice are mostly to be found in grants of exceptions to the usual rules. Thus, Earl Malcolm, Maldovine's successor, confirmed the right of the monks of Paisley Abbey, who held land in the Lennox, to be free of all exactions and the annoyance of having the earl's men to stay for the night, unless it was freely offered. The obvious inference is that the earl usually had the right to take certain goods for his own use, as well as quarter his servants throughout the estate while they went about his business. This, combined with service at the barony court, the providing of certain goods and men to the royal army, the limitations on the extraction of wood and fish and even on the use of roads and footpaths, indicates just how obvious and intrusive the activities of the landowner and his officials might be to his free tenants, let alone his unfree ones. The right to overnight lodgings, a considerable

demand, surely meant that most parts of the estate, however remote, made their contribution to keeping the lord in the manner to which he was becoming accustomed. However, the intrusiveness of lordship depended very much on social status within the estate. The earldom of Lennox entertained, within its boundaries, the smaller holdings of a number of important barons, such as the Grahams and the Lindsays, who stood in the same relationship to their earl as he did to the crown. Acknowledgement of their status within the hierarchy often included the right to be exempt from certain exactions or duties, such as, in the case of Sir John of Luss, suit of court. Unfortunately, since the court still had to sit, lesser tenants usually had to provide the service instead.³⁶ These barons also acted as officers and members of the earl's council, thus mirroring royal practice: Patrick Galbraith was steward of Lennox in the fourteenth century and Patrick Lindsay, son of Sir Hugh Lindsay, was both *toiseach* and forester.³⁷

Having asserted that relationships within the estate were of vital importance in maintaining its smooth running, so too were connections between the individual noble and others of a similar status, especially within a particular geographical locality. Marriage was obviously an important means of cementing such relationships: Earl Maldovine's wife, for example, was Elizabeth, daughter of Walter the Steward. James, steward of Scotland, was witness to a charter of Malcolm, earl of Lennox, his great-nephew; other signatories to Lennox charters included Henry, son of the earl of Menteith, Sir Reginald Crawford, Sir Colin Campbell, Sir David Lindsay, then justiciar of Lothian, Sir William Douglas, Sir Alan Comyn, Sir David Comyn, and Sir David Graham. All these were prominent noblemen and most can be shown to have had an interest in the south-western or the central Highlands. The concerns of the leading men of each locality were usually related to events close to home, rather than more national considerations; this is exactly how it should have been in an uncentralised kingdom. The successful noble was one who dealt with problems and difficulties in his own area and left the king to contend with his own estates, certain judicial matters, large-scale military affairs, and the intricacies of the hunt. The effectiveness of this system is best illustrated by the fact that parliament, acting as the highest court of the land, was still able to deal with the number of cases coming before it well into the fifteenth century; only then did the pressure become too great and demand arose for a much more static and formal organisation, comparable to the English law-courts. This does not imply that justice in Scotland was unavailable until the central organisational framework grew up to process it in the late Middle Ages; rather, the activities of the lesser courts, whether baronial or shrieval, had previously managed to deal with enough of the workload.

Although some ancient lineages, such as the lords of Galloway and the Celtic earls of Carrick, had disappeared, the core circle of Scottish noble families which had arrived in or survived the process of modernisation of the so-called "Davidian revolution"³⁸ were still there 150 years later. And the crown was still able to rely on them as instruments of royal government and authority long after the rights which pertained to such administrative power had disappeared south of the border.

CONCLUSION

As with other medieval monarchs, the power of the Scottish king rested on his dual role as giver of justice and leader in war. However, the military capabilities of Scottish castles, though often impressive, were rarely tested in the thirteenth century. By the end of that century, with the outbreak of the Wars of Independence, they became almost purely military in function, for the English garrisons at least. The castle's "proper" function, as a centre of administration, was rarely employed and the economic network over which it should have presided broke down. The Scots, who were ill-equipped for siege warfare precisely because Scottish castles had rarely required to be reduced in the previous century, were still able to be effective against the strongest curtain walls by starvation and treachery. The power exerted by these castles over the surrounding environment and its inhabitants was thus a double-edged sword – if this power was denied, these strongholds became isolated and vulnerable. They could only function effectively as fully integrated administrative centres, wherein both lord and man enacted their reciprocal rights and responsibilities, the very essence of medieval society and maintained order and stability in their society.

After the Wars of Independence, which heralded a period of general European economic upheaval, castle building was rarely engaged upon on the impressive scale of the thirteenth century. This, it has been suggested, indicates that the Scottish nobility, with the exception of the rising family of Douglas, no longer had the wealth or the desire to build a Bothwell or Kildrummy. This decreasing economic power perhaps influenced the move towards the building of tower-houses, which were altogether more cramped in style, being most fittingly described as "dour".³⁹ Again, however, this analysis rests on the belief that the Scottish crown and nobility longed for the safety of castles whose main features were size and military accoutrements but just could not muster the resources to build them. The long wars with England may certainly have introduced a defensive mentality into the Scottish psyche, but the primary military lesson of that period had surely been that fighting a conventional war, with pitched battles and sieges, was not the way to maintain Scottish

independence. Styles of castle building in Scotland could continue, allowing for variations in individual tastes, to represent the native landscape and climate, which was getting colder and wetter at the time. Military requirements, other than the most basic, do not explain Scottish castellated architecture. On the other hand, the Scottish nobility – unlike their kings – did not develop a style of romantic residence which so characterised later French medieval architecture of the later Middle Ages; lack of resources may have played their part but also, perhaps, a lack of inclination, born of a belief in the safety of unchallenged social status. Their relationship with the crown, formed by a long and effective mutual dependence in both peace and war, was maintained even after 1424 when succeeding kings sought to increase their power and prestige. Not surprisingly, however, a divergence of scale and style between royal and noble building-programmes became painfully obvious thereafter.

In its heyday, however, in the thirteenth century, the Scottish medieval castle, either noble or royal, was truly a focus of the wider community, reflecting an increasingly sophisticated administration dependent on a developing exploitation of resources, as well as a cosmopolitan outlook. Royal castles were generally understated, indicating not that the monarchy was poor and ineffective, but rather that it was assured of its power and had no need to defend itself against the nobility. Certain members of the Scottish nobility did build castles which were intended to signify wealth and status, but most were also content with the knowledge of who they were, and did not disguise themselves behind the grandeur of their curtain walls. The strength of the medieval kings of Scots lay in the fact that they played such an active role in Scottish society, particularly as law-givers, rather than hiding themselves away from all but a few in regal isolation. The first rank of the Scottish nobility also appear to have regarded their residences as practical establishments, whose form was dictated by their duties and recreation, rather than a need to show off their position. In other words, in the final analysis, they believed that function mattered far more than form.

All the owners of the great estates, from the king down, were getting richer in the thirteenth century. Alexander III, in particular, seems to have actively exploited the economic conditions of the mid-thirteenth century which worked in favour of the landowner and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Scottish nobility were doing much the same thing. While it is pointless to speculate on what might have been, we can imagine that the earl of Mar, sitting in his castle of Kildrummy in the 1250s, would have contemplated the future with confidence. It is quite ironic that this small country should have sought to develop its economic rather than its military potential, only to face the might of the Plantagenet war machine and to be castigated by historians for the undeveloped

nature of its defences ever since. Power can be administered in many ways, but most effectively in a time of peace and prosperity. This the castles of thirteenth-century Scotland undoubtedly illustrate.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- (1) It is not always helpful to generalise about castles in the Middle Ages: the thirteenth century appears to stand out in this respect, as it does in others, from the periods before and after and indeed this distinctiveness is one of the issues discussed in this paper. I am deeply indebted to Dr Matthew Strickland, Dr Ronnie Lee, Dr Steve Driscoll, Dr David Ditchburn, Dr Richard Oram, and Dr Andrew McKillop who individually found time to engage in a number of extremely stimulating and informative discussions which helped to shape this essay. It is reassuring to find that such an atmosphere of unselfish academic communion still exists. Needless to say, the views finally expressed here, and the responsibility for them, are my own.
- 2 N. J. G. Pounds, *The Medieval Castle in England and Wales: A Social and Political History* (Cambridge, 1990), 5.
- 3 R. Howlett (ed.), *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, vol. i (Rolls Series, London, 1885), 69–70.
- 4 A. O. Anderson, *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers, A. D. 500–1286* (London, 1908), 256, translating from W. Stubbs (ed.), *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi*, I (Rolls Series, London, 1867), 67–68.
- 5 G. W. S. Barrow, *RRS*, i (Edinburgh, 1960), 43.
- 6 In the Wars of Independence, "Celtic" earls were just as likely to side with Edward I and "Anglo-Normans" to maintain the patriotic cause. These terms are placed in inverted commas to denote the fact that, by the thirteenth century, they are anachronistic.
- 7 This by no means reflects on the earl's loyalty to the crown but rather on the king's desire to control such an important strategic point in the west; Maitland Club, *Cartularium Comitatus de Levenax* (Edinburgh, 1833), 1.
- 8 R. D. Pringle, *Doune Castle Guide-book* (Edinburgh, 1987), 5.
- 9 Lack of documentary records means that we have no way of knowing how wealthy the thirteenth-century nobility actually were; the example of the Maxwells suggests, however, that they were doing rather well at this time.
- 10 G. Simpson, "Claves castri. The role of the gatekeeper in Scottish medieval castles", *Château Gaillard*, xv (1992), 320.
- 11 J. Stuart and G. Burnett (eds), *ER*, i, 1264–1359 (Edinburgh, 1878), 5, 12, 15. The comparatively large garrison at Ayr is perhaps explained by the fact that there were a number of hostages residing in the castle as surety for the payment of local royal ducs. Royal authority was still accepted only with reluctance in the south-west.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 13 N. J. G. Pounds, *Medieval Castle in England and Wales*, 92.
- 14 *ER*, i, xliii.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 4.

- 16 Ibid., 5.
- 17 The sheriff of Fife at this time was David of Lochore (ibid).
- 18 J. Bain (ed.), *Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland*, ii (Edinburgh, 1881), no.1227.
- 19 *ER*, i, li-lii.
- 20 Ibid., 6–9. The length of the Forfar account, which contains mostly reference to payments in kind from a variety of sources, rather than bought foodstuffs, is evidence of this, since these payments were by no means extraordinary, but would usually have been transported to a central collection point, rather than to the king in residence.
- 21 Ibid., 8.
- 22 Thaners could act similarly for earls.
- 23 Dr Alexander Grant's timely essay, "Thaners and thanages", in A. Grant and K. J. Stringer (eds), *Medieval Scotland: Crown, Lordship and Community. Essays Presented to G. W. S. Barrow* (Edinburgh, 1993), 39–81, has managed to illuminate not only a difficult subject but the entire period.
- 24 *ER*, 19, 20.
- 25 Ibid., 32–35.
- 26 Ibid., 21, 22, 29, 30, 37.
- 27 J. W. Gilbert, "Hunting reserves", in P. McNeill and R. Nicholson (eds), *An Historical Atlas of Scotland c. 400 – c. 1600* (St Andrews, 1975), 33.
- 28 Hugh Abernethy, the sheriff of Roxburgh in 1265, had been the forester of Selkirk forest, *ER*, i 29.
- 29 Ibid., xlix-l.
- 30 G. Ritchie and M. Harman, *Exploring Scotland's Heritage: Argyll and the Western Isles* (Edinburgh, 1992), 75.
- 31 T. C. Smout, "Woodland history before 1850", in T. C. Smout (ed.), *Scotland since Prehistory* (Edinburgh, 1993), 42.
- 32 E. Roesdahl, "The end of Viking-age fortifications in Denmark, and what followed", *Château Gaillard*, xii (1985), 44.
- 33 See J. Balfour Paul, *The Scots' Peerage*, v (Edinburgh, 1911), 324–326, for the ancient lineage of the earls of Lennox.
- 34 Maitland Club, *Cartularium Comitatus*, 1–2.
- 35 F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1947), 490–491; 628.
- 36 Maitland Club, *Cartularium Comitatus*, 20–21.
- 37 Ibid., 49–50.
- 38 G. W. S. Barrow, *David I of Scotland* (Stenton Lecture, Reading, 1984), 11.
- 39 C. Tabraham, *Scottish Castles and Fortifications* (Edinburgh, 1986), 48.