



***Máel Coluim III Canmore:  
An Eleventh-Century Scottish King.***

**By Neil McGuigan**

Edinburgh: John Donald, 2021

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*Máel Coluim III Canmore: An Eleventh-Century Scottish King*. By Neil McGuigan. Edinburgh: John Donald, 2021. ISBN 9781910900192. xxiv + 588pp, 7 maps, 4 genealogical tables, and 8 pages of pictures and illustrations. £100.



riting a book on King Máel Coluim III is a landmark achievement, not least because it has never been done before. It is not difficult to see why. If you were to confine yourself to sources very likely to have been originally written during his reign in his kingdom, you would be reduced to a few property-records. Máel Coluim III is mentioned in only one of them, the donation of Balchrystie (in Fife) that he and St Margaret made to the Céli Dé of Loch Leven. This desperately meagre diet can be supplemented by English, Irish, and continental chronicles that occasionally mention goings-on in the Scottish kingdom, and by later records of donations made by Máel Coluim and Margaret to Dunfermline. This might be enough for a fairly brief entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. How can this sustain a book, never mind a book that runs to over 500 pages (not including appendices, bibliography, and index)?

The answer, ironically, lies in the extreme limitations of readily available material. This has two consequences. The first is signalled by the full title of the book. You might expect this to have been *Máel Coluim III King of Scots, 1058–1093*, followed by a striking subtitle. Instead, it is *Máel Coluim III Canmore: an Eleventh-Century Scottish King*. The choice of a century, rather than the dates of his reign (or life), alerts the reader that a significant aspect of the book is its discussion of what it meant to be a Scottish king in this period, and the nature of the Scottish realm and its wider context. This accounts for three chapters and the introduction. The use of the outdated epithet Canmore highlights the intention to make the historiographical legacy of the reign a fundamental dimension of the book: there are three chapters on this. To recap: the first reason that the limitations of available material for a narrative has led to a very large book is because *terra firma* needed to be found elsewhere by discussing the general context of the reign and its afterlife.

This was not simply for the sake of filling space, however: ironically the second consequence of having a meagre diet of material is that the attempt to discuss what happened when, and why, requires a plethora of possibilities to be considered. This approach to writing history has in the last couple of decades developed into a highly sophisticated art by historians of Scotland before 1100. It is the predominant element in the book, occupying eleven chapters. It also extends into two thematic chapters on St

Margaret and the Church, and on Court and Learning. Neil McGuigan takes this to a new level by drawing on an impressive range of material—not only in medieval Gaelic, Norse, and English, as well as Latin, but an astonishing range of periods, countries, and disciplines, including onomastics and archaeology. There is, for example, an elegant explanation of how *Blascona*, an unidentified *civitas* in Orkney, could be based on a pre-Norse name for the Brough of Birsay. In keeping with the best examples of this kind of history, the narrative ranges well beyond the confines of northern Britain into Norwegian, Irish, English, and French history in this period, which in turn leads to moments in Hungary and Ukraine. The parameters of Neil McGuigan's discussion, however, reaches further still. The unsuspecting reader, for example, will find that they will learn the acreages of some counties and bishoprics in Scotland, England, and Ireland. They will also be presented with striking parallels with recent events, for example comparing Máel Coluim III with Osama Bin Laden in the context of the Scottish king's presence at the founding-ceremony for Durham Cathedral in 1093, or drawing a parallel between the narrow way Durham sources reported the killing of their bishop in 1080 and how Gordon Brown was blamed in the UK for the financial crash in 2008.

The most important achievement of this book, however, is Neil McGuigan's keen sense of the text-histories and contexts of all the chronicles and other material that are available from this period or soon after. A cornerstone of his new interpretation of the Scottish takeover of the region south of the Forth is his deep understanding of sources written in Durham in the twelfth century. This allows him to argue compellingly that a lordship centred on Bamburgh remained independent of whoever controlled York well into Máel Coluim's reign, and that Scottish control of regions east and south of Edinburgh was less certain than has hitherto been supposed. His discussion is not only infused with a more detailed consideration of well known sources, but integrates other material, such as continental chronicles and histories, more completely than ever before. As a result, he creates a more varied palette of possibilities, including fresh colours, with which to paint his picture of this king and his times. The result is not, and cannot hope to be, a vivid likeness of the man. It is not, and should not be a coherent portrayal of past events and people. It is, rather, an active exploration of an often ephemeral history, with Neil McGuigan providing a constant and clear commentary on the possibilities, and his reasons for preferring some options rather than others. It is a conversation that Neil McGuigan fully expects to continue, and which will undoubtedly be fundamentally richer, thanks to this noble volume.

In each of its three aspects—that is, as a discussion of kingship and the kingdom, as a historical narrative and as an account of Mael Coluim’s historiographical legacy, Neil McGuigan’s book offers a highly original treatment that will be an essential point of reference for future scholars. In all three dimensions it pushes the bounds of scholarship beyond what has been attempted before. There will, inevitably, be elements that each reader will find more satisfying than others, and more significant. The discussion of the army and army service, for example, is especially striking. He emphasises the importance of increasingly regular raiding into northern England by kings of Scots in the eleventh century as occasions when men from across the kingdom would develop a shared purpose and identity. They would have formed the core contingent in a force that would also, when led by David I in the 1130s, have had separate armies from other polities under the king’s authority at that time. It was the Scottish army in this force which would have shouted *Albannaig* before the Battle of the Standard in 1138, as reported by Henry of Huntingdon.

All in all, Neil McGuigan’s book represents a landmark in all the major topics he touches in this book. It is also, more generally, a torch of light in the continual quest to understand the Middle Ages in its own terms. It is a challenging book as any seriously original work in this field must be. For anyone seeking fresh insights, it promises to keep on delivering for readers not only today, but for many, many years to come.

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