

**Torrance, D., 2013, *The Battle for Britain. Scotland and the Independence Referendum*, Biteback Publishing, London, pp. XIV+370.**

As the present author has written elsewhere, David Torrance should be considered to be one of the leading historians of the Scottish Unionism. This, added to his vast knowledge of the Scottish politics in general, which is reflected in numerous books (one need only refer to the recently published biography of Alex Salmond, *Salmond. Against the Odds* – look for my Polish-language extensive review essay of its second edition in “Horyzonty Polityki” vol. 3, no. 5, 2012; edited volume on the Scottish Conservative Party *Whatever Happened to Tory Scotland?* and the authorized biography of David Steel, *David Steel: Rising Hope to Elder Statesman*), puts him in an ideal position to write an interesting overview of the Scottish independence referendum. And indeed Torrance’s latest book does not disappoint. Firstly, it offers a detailed description of events leading to this year’s referendum. This is not a minor accomplishment as every observer of this subject has to cope on a daily basis with the vast amount of published or broadcasted material. Second – and more important – the author is not only presenting the facts, but is also trying to see their deeper meaning, put them in context and formulate synthetic conclusions. In this respect Torrance’s efforts deserve to be more than appreciated. The title of this book also deserves a mention. For a Polish ear it is very close to the *Battle of Britain*, the Second World War air campaign in which Polish squadrons played an important part. In the *Battle for Britain*, the Poles resident in Scotland also have a role to play, as they are eligible to vote in the referendum as citizens of the European Union member state.

In spite of Torrance’s best efforts his book, like many other serious titles regarding this subject, at the end leaves the reader rather confused. This, of course, is not the author’s fault as it stems from the nature of the discussed topics. Why the confusion? In the opinion of the present writer, many readers (academics included) of such books tend to look for a more or less coherent answer to the crucial question: would potential independence be detrimental or advantageous to Scotland? Obviously the authors of such analyses want to be, and rightly so, as impartial as possible. Hence they can not conclusively answer such a question. The amount of facts, of claims and counterclaims

and – most crucially – of the unknowns is just too overwhelming. The economist John Kay, quoted by Torrance, to a question very similar to the one formulated above, gave the following answer: “The only sensible answer is that no one really knows” (p. 68).

This decisive conclusion does not deter the author from meticulously discussing in almost 400 pages not only the intricacies of the independence debate, but also the alternatives to independence or the status-quo (Torrance himself clearly has pro-federal sympathies). Consequently, the reader gets carefully balanced pictures of the discussions regarding the Edinburgh Agreement (Was it indeed a clever move by the British Government to insist on a single yes/no question? There is a brilliant quotation from an unnamed Scottish government adviser on p. 24 indicating that a second question on enhanced devolution could be potentially Union saving and thus ensuring David Cameron’s place in history. The tendencies observable in the recent polls – this is being written in April 2014 – put such words in a new perspective). In the field of the economy, predictions are especially difficult and certainties almost nonexistent, though most of the experts quoted by Torrance – as does Torrance himself – seem to believe that Scotland is capable of functioning as an economically independent state. The author also notes that the concept of a currency union with the remainder of the United Kingdom is the weakest link in the SNP’s case for independence. Recent events, of course, have proven this point. One thing is quite striking in this chapter – its Alex Salmond’s understanding of social-democracy as he seemingly believes it is possible to combine social-democratic policies with very competitive tax rates. What is more, such neo-liberal views were criticized by one of Salmond’s economic advisers Professor Joseph Stiglitz), defence and foreign affairs (As Torrance shows, an independent Scotland’s future membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are the most important problems in this respect. In spite of various claims and counterclaims discussed in the text it is hard not to conclude that at the end on each side pragmatism will prevail. As Torrance’s well-taken point regarding Tibet and a concept of an *ethical foreign policy* proves, such a pragmatic stance in international politics would be nothing new to the SNP), welfare and pensions (in this chapter the author skillfully tries to test how progressive the SNP is in fact in the field of welfare. His insightful considerations are well summed up by

the observations regarding the Scottish council tax rates frozen for the seventh year in a row – is it a progressive policy or rather a populist policy?) Or culture and national identity (in the opinion of the present writer there are two central problems in this chapter. Firstly, there is a tension between *existential* and *utilitarian* nationalisms. Both of these currents are present in the SNP hence it cannot be conclusively established if independence would be for its own sake or it would be a first step towards a decisive change in terms of social or economic policies. However, the sum of arguments in this book tips the balance towards the first option. Secondly, to what extent are the Scots different from the other nations of the UK, and are the expectations of such a change justified? As Torrance shows, some doubts remain in this respect too. This obviously should not be understood as meaning that the Scots' aspirations for their own state are less legitimate).

The above observations and the reviewed book's narration itself may suggest that the pro-independence camp is dominated by the somewhat contradictory SNP. This is indeed the case. There is, of course, a very insightful chapter on the *Yes Scotland* and *Better Together* campaigns, but the above mentioned impression is inescapable – the SNP is the agenda-setting force when it comes to pro-independence subjects, and Alex Salmond with Nicola Sturgeon are the faces of the pro-independence movement. It is worth noting, however, that domination is still short of a complete control, hence at times *Yes Scotland* seems to be bolder in some respects than the SNP (look for example for the analysis of its stance on welfare as described on pp. 165-166).

John Kay and Matt Qvortrup, two academics quoted by Torrance, observed, contrary to the general belief, that the economy is not going to be a decisive factor for the outcome of the referendum (p. 110). It may be safely assumed that it will not be defence or foreign policy either. As stated above, discussions of such subjects are so inconclusive that they cannot unequivocally inform a voter if "yes" or "no" is the definitely right choice. The present writer would risk observing that this is another of the lasting impressions with which this book leaves one. And this should not be viewed as a critique. But if it is not to be economics (or not only economics) then what will it be? What can be decisive? The answers given in the book suggest that such human factors as instinct, emotion and sentiment should not be underestimated (p. 336; the present author shares this view and has expressed it in the

conclusion of his review of *Scotland's Choices. The Referendum and What Happens Afterwards* by Iain McLean, Jim Gallagher and Guy Lodge in "Horyzonty Polityki" vol. 5, no. 10, 2014). So it could be hope for a better (or at least different) future against a fear of change. In other words, the campaign pits self-confidence against self-doubt.

This book is also about a certain kind of arrogance and paternalism. On the one hand there is a pro-union campaign in which the fear-factor seems to be playing a preeminent role. On the other, there is the SNP with its detailed policies for an independent Scotland as if it was taking for granted its future status as a ruling party. Obviously, a set of well thought-out proposals for the future is always very welcome. In the end, however, it is the people, the sovereign, who are going to determine the result of the referendum and, in case of a yes majority, establish the institutions and core-values of an independent Scottish state. Here probably lies the key to the sovereignty question so often invoked during the referendum debates, but rarely in this context. Often one reads about how inconsequential the concept of sovereignty has become in an increasingly interdependent world (hence independence would be irrelevant too). But however limited sovereignty is in the contemporary world, it still offers a space which enables independent countries to noticeably differ from each other. In this space a sovereign has a role to play. Strangely, such a people-empowering and confidence-enhancing perspective is not very prominent in the mainstream independence debate. This may play into the hands of the Unionists (The rationale behind this would be: If we – the people – cannot change anything then there is no point in voting for independence). However, the other outcome is also plausible. A majority vote for independence – in spite of supposed voters' alienation and the mostly negative pro-Union campaign – and after that a vote for a government not necessarily lead by the SNP, hence possibly more progressive. Maybe then one more factor should be added to the list and again a very human one: contrariness.

Among all these uncertainties one thing is certain: David Torrance again has authored a well-researched, well-written and thought-provoking book.

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