



Before Scotland: The Story of Scotland Before History

Alistair Moffat

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Before Scotland transforms prehistory into gripping narrative history, demonstrating that the history of the land that became Scotland is one of dramatic geological events and impressive human endeavour.

Before Scotland: The Story of Scotland Before History Details

Date : Published December 31st 2005 by Thames & Hudson (first published April 3rd 2005)

ISBN : 9780500051337

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Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : History, Cultural, Scotland, Nonfiction, Historical, Archaeology



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Meredith Stoddard says

A fascinating look at what we know about the people who inhabited Scotland as it developed and when it was made up of separate tribal kingdoms.

Zaiga says

An interesting book that seems to be more for UK audiences, as places were often casually referred to. Could use more maps. It's not a scholarly book, and is sometimes rambling. But Moffat does provide sources at the end so you can check up on his research. I didn't always trust what he was saying to be scholarly consensus, but I was happy to learn *something* about a part of history I know nothing about.

Debbie says

I found this book to be both interesting and boring in places . It tells the story of the land we know as Scotland before it became Scotland. The narrative begins 10,000 years ago and continues up until AD900 when the last of the native British kingdoms in the north were effaced.

The fact that I can even write that last sentence shows how much I learnt from this book. Before reading it I had wrongly thought that the Gaelic speaking Scots were the original inhabitants of Scotland and the English their bitter enemies. Turns out that Gaelic speaking Scots are just a different branch of English invaders. The original inhabitants of the land before Scotland were British people, named so because they lived in Pretannike which translated as 'Land of the Painted People' (they tattooed themselves). The Romans mangled this into Britannica which in turn became Britain. The Pretannikai spoke a Celtic language closely related to Welsh. I also learnt a lot about the Picts who I had heard of but knew absolutely nothing about. It's a shame we know so little about them. Some of the carved stones they have left behind are beautiful and very mysterious.

I enjoyed the earlier chapters of the book the most. These were set in the most distant past and explained all the geologic and climatic changes that helped shape the land and frame the way of life of the inhabitants of that land. And I learned of the existence of Doggerland which I had never heard of before.

The middle chapters bored me a bit with their descriptions of Roman battles as I've never been interested in warfare. It was interesting to learn a bit more about Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall. It was also interesting to see that the divisions between lowland and highland inhabitants seemed to exist even back then with the lowlanders collaborating most shamelessly with their Roman oppressors.

So all in all it was mostly an interesting read but it could probably have been a third less long and been even better!

Pam Shelton-Anderson says

Not an easy read, but this is a thoroughly fascinating history of the ancient early inhabitants of the area that would become Scotland. Even more interesting is the DNA evidence that shows that the majority of indigenous British people have this same DNA as these ancient people and that many of their customs and place names have endured to the present.

Edoardo Albert says

The problem with prehistory is that there is no history. That is, there are no stories, no names, none of the usual hooks upon which we hang our understanding to enlighten, entertain and help us remember to guide us through the greater part of human existence. All there are, are mute remains and although these can be eloquent in their own way, notably the village excavated at Skara Brae in Orkney, yet they are essentially still silent about the men, women and children who once lived. So, it's a measure of Moffat's achievement here that he makes the silent people before Scotland existed come alive, at least as far as is possible, and without entering into speculation and fantasy. He does this through a disciplined use of ethnographic parallels and examples drawn from Scotland's historic past which, he believes, were continuations of prehistoric practices. The writing is lively and entertaining throughout, the text studded with fascinating little boxes giving insights into other parts of the world apart from Scotland, and the book taught me a great deal about prehistory in general, not just that of Scotland. Recommended.

Mick Bordet says

I read this straight after "Inside the Neolithic Mind" and it came as a welcome relief from that book's many frustrations. The timespan covered by the book could have made it very clinical, especially since so little is actually known about the start of the period, but references to surviving ethnic peoples and some amusing little asides about daily life make it a pleasure to read. Particularly refreshing was the author's lack of assigning every single archeological find to some ancient religious significance - something that I have found all too common in this area - and when he speculates about something, he makes it quite clear than this is the case. The book is packed full of information and I am certain to return to it again in the future.

Chris says

This book was precisely what it set out to be. A well-documented book about prehistoric scottish history. That didn't stop me from losing interest, however. I got about halfway through before I gave up. I just wasn't interested anymore; it felt very repetitive. But it's well written, so don't take this as a warning against it, I just lost interest in the topic.

Paul says

Moffat at his best. This book is evocative, informative and entertaining all the way through. His style is easy to digest without coming off as condescending. As the book ends around the time the most solid historical records begin, much is educated speculation, but you'll come away from it with a great sense of the people, culture, and landscape of Scotland. I've read it twice already, and know I'll return to it again.

Hw Santry says

I learned a lot and enjoyed the book, but it did assume I know about Scotland geography, place locations and general history. Google close at hand helped me work out of confusion several times.

Astrid says

I love Scotland and after visiting it I wanted to learn more about its past. "Before Scotland" sounded just like the book that covered all that I wanted to know since I'm mainly interested in early history. And I was not dissapointed.

I very much like Alistair Moffat's writing style and the way he brings what happened way back then to todays readers attention. He's a storyteller, able to paint the past's picture.

A well researched history book that I've reread more than once and will certainly do so in the future.

Marcas Brian MacStiofáin Ó Mhaitiú Ó Domhnaill says

a great book. full of information and a fascinatin read. could hardly put it down! loved it.

David Kintore says

Got this book after seeing Alistair Moffat make an entertaining appearance at the Edinburgh Book Festival a few years ago. Moffat's account of 'Scotland before history' is interesting and intriguing, drawing attention to the place names, people and artefacts that are routinely overlooked in most historical records. There is a distinct 'what did the Romans ever do for us' tone to some of the book, which is quite a refreshing perspective.

David H. Millar says

A great reference book and very readable.

Otherwyrd says

The author takes on a pretty huge task here - the history of the country we now call Scotland before it was called that. As such it runs from the settling of the land after the ice age, through the Celts, the Romans, the Picts and the Danes, before finishing in AD 900.

I enjoyed the book with some caveats. For one, the author likes to remind us that much of this was prehistory - before the written record - and speculation would be pointless, before going on to do a whole lot of speculating of his own. While some of the points he was making were valid and quite possibly accurate, it hurts the narrative.

On a more practical note, this book had some nice colour plates but could really have done with more lines drawings and detailed maps. Instead we get a single generic map at the end which is next to useless, and a lot of boxes breaking up the text to tell us some supposed related fact. You could have lost these quite easily as they added little to the book.

Nonetheless, a pretty good read.

Veronica Alt says

My biggest issue with this book is the author's soft spot for prehistory. While it makes him a valuable source for anything BC, once the time line hits 500 AD, he sabotages himself with outdated categorization and phrasing. By still using "The Dark Ages" as a time period, Moffat brings into question his credibility. By admitting that most of his peers have long moved past using this phrase, he destroys any semblance of trust one might have built while reading.

Combined with some pretty severely internalized misogyny (any time he mentions a woman or women, it is usually framed with a demeaning or superfluous remark), Moffat drags down his well-researched and accessible study. As a Scottish historian and a woman, I wanted this book to be a great source. What I got was a war and my own very angry marginalia.
