

*Scottish Medieval Churches: Architecture and Furnishings*, Richard Fawcett, Tempus Publishing Ltd., Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2002, paperback, 384 pp, many black and white illustrations and diagrams, price £17.99

Richard Fawcett is a Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments with Historic Scotland, and has throughout his career taken a special interest in Scotland's medieval ecclesiastical architecture. He has looked very thoroughly at the evidence contained in the surviving fabric of the country's relatively small body of medieval churches, and has travelled and read widely to try to put his observations into the context of contemporary developments in England and on the Continent of Europe. This volume is a distillation of his observations and the conclusions he has drawn from them, and in a very real sense it is a life's work. Some of the material has been published before, in provisional form, but this account is the definitive one, and one not likely to be superseded. Fawcett has chosen, probably in view of the existence of an extensive general literature on the subject, to exclude consideration of buildings as a whole; his analysis is of what one can learn from the parts of buildings. As most Scottish medieval churches are the products of several campaigns of building, and often of destruction and rebuilding of earlier work, this approach has much to commend it, but the treatment assumes that the reader has some knowledge of the totality of the buildings which forms its subject. This is a specialised monograph, and will be reviewed in this context. Anyone wanting a general account of Scottish medieval churches must look elsewhere.

The structure of the volume is clear and strong. There is a long introductory chapter on the design and building of churches, with a section on mouldings. He concludes that the medieval church was the product of a sustained and systematic design. The section on plan forms is illustrated by a large number of ground plans of the medium-sized and larger and more complex churches. Somewhat to this reviewer's disappointment, he makes no attempt at an analysis of the

many simple rectangular churches of the western highlands and islands, an important body of evidence for the character of the Scottish medieval church, and probably for its worship practices. This introduction is followed by major chapters on the exterior and the interior of churches, and on fixtures, fittings and decoration. The volume concludes with a detailed bibliography, part of which is conventionally organised, and part as what one might term a topographical bibliography, the references for each of the buildings mentioned being grouped in a paragraph on that building. This is a very helpful approach.

The major chapters are each subdivided into functional subsections: for the exterior these are façade design, towers, spires and crown steeples, porches, doorways, window design, base courses, wallheads and buttresses. Though, as said above, this leaves the reader to make his or her own synthesis for an individual building, Fawcett's approach has the great virtue of making rigorous typological analysis possible. As an individual building may have some advanced and some conservative features within the same period of design, this is probably the only approach which could make Fawcett's meticulous comparative treatment work. The sections on façade design and on towers, spires and crown steeples are easy to follow, but where the mouldings of doorways and the windows are being discussed the argument becomes at times difficult to follow. Fawcett's outline diagrams of the profiles of mouldings are remarkable, but not particularly easy to read: a clearer indication of the solid side of the boundary lines he uses would have been helpful. His analysis of patterns of tracery is a development of an article on the subject he wrote for Stewart Cruden's festschrift *Studies in Scottish Antiquity*, edited by David Breeze and published in 1984. The section on base courses may seem a little recondite, but Fawcett has made a speciality of studying these features, and makes a convincing case for their usefulness as a tool in analysing the phasing of building construction.

The chapter on interiors is divided into sections on internal elevations and bay design, piers and their detailing, major arches, decorative arcading, other details of walls and the shafts to support vaulting, the vaulting itself, and ceilings, and roof construction. In the section on internal elevations and bay design, Fawcett's free-hand comparative sketches are models of clarity, and are a means of expressing design ideas impossible to photograph, or to express verbally with any degree of clarity. This reviewer would, however, like to have seen a few drawings showing the effect of the repetition of the bays which Fawcett shows as individual units, as the rhythm of bay repetition is an important part of the design concept of the major medieval church. The sections on capitals and on decorative arcading are convincingly illustrated by excellent photographs, as are the pieces on vaulting, ceilings and roof construction.

The final major section, on fixtures, furnishings and decoration is necessarily constrained by the very limited survival in Scotland of pre-Reformation furnishings and decorative schemes. Fawcett divides this section into consideration of altars, sacrament houses, sedilia, piscinae and holy water stoups, lecterns and pulpits, choir stalls, screens, pulpits and rood lofts, fonts, tomb design and painted decoration. The much more extensive survival of masonry fittings makes the sections on sacrament houses, sedilia, piscinae and holy water stoups, and on tomb design more extended than the others, and better illustrated. The photographs of the extraordinary sacrament houses of the north east do not, however, do these works of art the justice they deserve: the artificial cross-lighting techniques developed by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland are needed to show their subtle low-relief modelling to advantage.

Fawcett's achievement in bringing a lifetime of research to publication must not be undervalued. The very positive merits of this volume, however, cannot wholly compensate for its reluctance to recognise the general reader's interest in the individual building as a totality.



Fawcett has a very useful church by church guide to primary documentation, but there is no information as to where these buildings are, or how accessible they are. Nor are there more than a very few illustrations of complete churches. In the opinion of this reviewer it would have been possible to make this book more accessible to the general reader without significantly altering its balance. The other notable omission, which is perhaps more understandable, is the absence of more than a few fleeting references to worship practices, and what church buildings can tell us about them. Much of such interpretation must be speculative, but where would archaeology – and this study is primarily an archaeological one – be without speculation. These are, however, in a sense quibbles, and should not obscure the value of this publication. This is unquestionably the most important work on medieval church buildings in Scotland written since MacGibbon and Ross's pioneering three volume *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*, published in the 1890s. It will certainly stand as the definitive work in its field, and will be essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in, or responsibility for, this important part of Scotland's built heritage for a very long time to come.

*John R Hume*