

**KINGCRAFT IN
SCOTLAND, AND OTHER
ESSAYS AND SKETCHES**

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Kingcraft in Scotland, and other essays and sketches by Peter Ross

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PETER ROSS

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BY

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Kingcraft in Scotland.



IN studying the History of Scotland we get, among other things, a better idea of the rise, progress, value, and decay of the system of kingly power than possibly we could derive from reading the story of any other nation in Europe. We can trace the system of monarchical government from its earliest stage, when the king was simply a leader, until the year 1603 when the singular compound of ruler and teacher who then held sway gladly quitted Scotland for a new tenure of power in England. We find the monarchy at times held by a saint, a hero, a statesman, a woman, and by a dozen or so of nonentities, whose capacity for kingship, or even for ordinary leadership, was only perceptible to their courtiers and dependents. We find a long continued struggle for power with the nobility, we see the gradual rise of the people to influence, and finally hear the complaints of one who believed in the sacredness of his kingly calling as he realises that the people are wielding a power superior to all his divine right pretensions through their chosen leaders—the preachers of the Reformation and their immediate successors. It is an instructive story. It shows us that kingship is a special vocation—that means leadership. It proves that its strength, from the beginning, really lay in the love and confidence of the people,—and that when the qualities of leadership—whether superior sanctity, heroism, or statesmanship, were wanting, the kingly title was of very little value. When the wearer of the crown was a weakling, the power was wielded by someone else. When the sovereign was in sympathy with the desires or sentiments of the people his word was law; when the people distrusted, despised, or even disliked a king his real influence upon the community was small indeed. How truly royal in every way were such kings as the sainted David, the heroic Bruce, or the statesman-like first of the James's, and what miserable caricatures of royalty were most of the others, Davids, Roberts, and James's, who held the sceptre after Bannockburn made Scotland a nation? "The

divine right" of Bruce became a contemptible affair in the hands of his son and successor. The statesmanship of James I. and what James VI. understood by statesmanship were two very different things, and the loyalty, potency, influence and kingship of the former may be placed against the feebleness, treachery, jealousy and effeminacy of the latter as indicating how high royalty could rise in Scotland, and to what a degree of puerility it might descend and still retain its nominal condition of actual kingship.

So far as we can trace even with the aid of tradition, the government in Scotland has always been monarchical—that is, it was under one chief who by his prowess, or by the devotion of his followers, or it may be by his birth, was deemed superior to those about him. The early kings were necessarily warriors, and they owed their supremacy directly or indirectly, to their sword. Who was really the first recognized king of Scotland is not exactly known, although the early chroniclers would fain not allow us to be ignorant. One traces the Scottish royal house back to the time of Noah; another, desiring to be more precise, fixes the date of the first monarchy at B.C. 443. Catalogues of the ancient kings have been carefully and laboriously drawn up by monkish historians, and, although prior to Fergus II. we are permitted to know little of them beyond their names and the manner of their deaths, we have enough to show that even the fertile brain of the cloistered historian never imagined kings to be anything else than soldiers. The first glimpse of history we get, that is real history and not unsupported tradition, is in the year 843, when the Picts and Scots united under King Kenneth Macalpine, and this union made Kenneth so much more powerful than all the other chiefs that his supremacy was unquestioned. His power was simply, however, that of a commander over an army. He looked to his chiefs for support as the general looks to his officers, and they in turn commanded the loyalty of the people. His kingship was merely a military government, and it was his acts or fighting superiority which gave him the leadership over the many little chiefs who made up his community. The people owed allegiance not to him directly but to their chiefs, and it is fair to believe that these little potentates owed their supremacy in their own localities simply on account of their strength, courage, daring or warlike skill. Land charters had slight potency in those early days, birthright amounted to very little; the clan was a community, the chiefship was not heredi-