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Book review

A readable, robust and unapologetic feminist voice

- Reviews section -

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Recognising the book as a valuable and timely contribution to the referendum debate, Sinead notes how the two authors' approaches fuse to form a readable, robust and unapologetic feminist voice.

As we reach the final stages of the referendum campaign it is disturbing to consider the extent to which male voices are dominating the debate. The TV debates and newspaper headlines reinforce the macho nature of the discourse. Therefore, knowing the short time frame left of this campaign, "Scottish Independence: A Feminist Response" by Cat Boyd & Jenny Morrison provides a timely and important intervention as well as being a concise and bracing read.

Its accessibility is balanced with sound academic research, reflecting the experiences of its two authors, Cat Boyd, a Trade Unionist and leading activist in the Radical Independence Campaign and Jenny Morrison, an academic at the University of Glasgow researching women's involvement in the independence referendum. Together, their approaches fuse to form a very readable, robust and unapologetic feminist voice.

Cutting through all the romanticised notions of Scottish women's history, Boyd and Morrison's argument is clear - Scotland is still too British, and it is its Britishness, tied to outdated notions of Empire and militaristic hegemony, that makes women suffer.

Divided into eight chapters, Boyd and Morrison begin with the assertion that devolution has only, so far, slowed the decline of women's involvement and representation. With Westminster hardwired to neo-liberalism, the struggle for women's liberation has regressed. Each chapter systematically analyses areas of British society which have failed women, before suggesting how these issues can be reframed, even redefined, through independence.

Boyd and Morrison argue that crucial to understanding the under-representation of women is getting to grips with power relations; men's power is asserted through violence, while poverty and a lack of economic choices reaffirm this power. Throughout this short book the question remains, 'how do we use independence to shift power to women?'

In the Chapter "War and Women" where the aggression of the British state towards women is exposed, Boyd and Morrison cut to the crux of the argument. Describing Westminster as "fighting phantom enemies abroad whilst closing Rape Crisis centres" Boyd and Morrison unambiguously assert that the militarism of Britain is detrimental to women, and the militaristic society, the skeletal remains of the British empire, appropriates feminist terminology to justify the horrors of neo-imperialism. While Britain continues to spend billions reinforcing our militarism, purportedly to keep women safe from threats, the very services we rely on to assist with the very real dangers women face are being severed.

Another notable chapter, Culture and Despair, analyses the more subtle ways in which British Culture incubates women's oppression. From the beauty industry and page 3 to the habitual sexism of the workplace - exacerbated by privatisation - the subordination of women is perpetuated by stereotypical British culture. In tackling the challenges we face, Boyd and Morrison are realistic - they won't be solved by independence in itself. But this broader understanding of British culture's effect on women needs to frame our understanding of the debate and the values needed to shape a new Scotland.

These suggestions of how independence can improve women's lives become solidified in the final section of the book where they find more concrete expression. From ending the antiquated male-privilege inheritance laws through

Land Reform and ensuring women's committees in community ownership projects, to the socialisation of care and realising women's participation in the economy through reproductive labour that is ignored in GDP measurements. Boyd and Morrison lay out eight pathways that an independent Scotland must take to tackle the inequalities and injustices women face.

In the short term, 'Scottish Independence: A Feminist Response' provides a methodology to engage with women voters - joining the dots between seemingly disparate issues establishes a surer foundation for engaging women in the debate. At a time where the post-modern strands of feminism seem to dominate the discourse, the Marxist-feminist methodology employed here is refreshing, providing the structural analysis that encourages discussion, centred on the experiences of working-class women.

Post September 18th, this book sets out a design for change. Not only providing us with a different methodology to answer the question posed at the Ballot Box on September 18th, but further outlining a blueprint for how we can shape the new institutions that Scotland can create to ensure equality.

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