

more than 400 digital scans of the manuscript in easy-to-access and thumb-nailed jpegs. The size of these files is not particularly huge, so details tend to pixilate at high resolution, but they are more than adequate for the purposes of most scholarship and certainly a welcome resource for those of us keen to work from manuscripts but unable to justify to our schools our pressing need to travel constantly to Europe.

Throughout the thesis, Withers retains a fascination with the very nature of the reader's interaction with the object and the limitations of that interaction, without ever becoming mired in unwieldy or restrictive ideology. As he argues at one point, the *Hexateuch* itself 'challenges modern viewers, no less than it challenged the Anglo-Saxon reader, to gaze beyond the frame of any single illustration or the block of a particular text ... [It] requires us to understand text and image as simultaneous and complementary translations of stories that exist beyond mere textuality or iconography' (265).

*Chris Bishop*  
*Australian National University*

**Woolf, Alex, *From Pictland to Alba 789-1070***

(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, New Edinburgh History of Scotland 2, 2007) paperback; xv + 384 pages; RRP £19.99; ISBN 9780748612345

The New Edinburgh History of Scotland, under the general editorship of Roger A Mason, promises to be a treasure trove for those who study Scotland. It is not, as one might expect, a series of definitive survey volumes, synthesising scholarship to date on each period. Rather, it is emerging as a stimulating series of volumes representing the individual, and sometimes idiosyncratic, scholarship of an outstanding group of researchers. Volume 1, James Fraser's *From Caledonia to Pictland to 795*, fits this description. Alex Woolf's volume 2 does so even better. Woolf was an inspired choice to author this volume: his background knowledge and intellectual grasp of a breathtakingly wide range of sources, languages and concepts relating to the period enable him apparently effortlessly to paint the big picture of a highly complex and rapidly changing world. As he admits with disarming frequency and candour, it is his own big picture, and probably not identical to that of any other scholar of the period – but this is to be expected in an area where there is such a dearth of direct evidence and such a belated proliferation of original research.

Woolf takes as his 'bookends' the *Histories* of the Venerable Bede and Henry of Huntingdon, highlighting Bede's famous citation of the five languages of Britain, all of which were spoken in what is now Scotland, and exploring what happened, between the times of Bede and Henry, to the

Pictish language and those who spoke it. This, of course, involves an extensive excursus into the Vikings and their languages, together with exploration of material from Wales, England and Ireland. The story is largely about kings: as Woolf points out, their names are sometimes almost all the information we have. He manages, though, to make a great deal out of a handful of names and the meagre details accompanying them in the chronicles. Very occasionally, his deductions are questionable: of an event at Chester where ‘six kings’ were present, he concludes that since there were four Welsh kings ruling at the time and the king of Strathclyde would ‘almost certainly’ have been present, it is ‘not possible’ that both the kings of Scotland attended (208).

*Primus inter pares* of the many features of Woolf’s commentary on this enigmatic period is his discussion of the even more enigmatic Pictish language. In a very helpful discussion, he lays out his hypothesis that early British and Gaelic were partially mutually intelligible, much as (he says) Old English and Old Norse must have been. He then explores the implications of Pictish-speakers’ geographical separation from other British-speakers and their proximity to Gaelic-speakers, to present a very plausible explanation of the evidence that survives for Pictish.

Woolf’s writing style makes the book a delight to read despite its weighty content. He likens early medieval church settlements to ‘tumours, comprised of the same basic components as their host society but transforming them [and] rapidly spreading their influence throughout the land’ (35). Of the Dál Riata king list, he says ‘[t]he phrase “a dog’s breakfast” springs to mind’ (61). He is occasionally gently critical of his peers: ‘Clearly all three sources recount the same battle. Surprisingly not all historians have thought so’ (143).

The idiosyncratic use of the term ‘Albania’ to distinguish the polity Woolf is discussing seems a little ill-chosen (despite its occasional use by contemporary Latin authors), since it is the name of another present-day European nation. One cannot help but sympathise, however, with his quest for a term that is not loaded with other meanings: Scotland is the modern-day polity and more extensive; Alba is the modern Gaelic name of Scotland; Pictland was an earlier and less extensive polity. Australian readers, over-sensitised to the word ‘ethnic’, might struggle with its occasional over-ready appearance in this book. Following a discussion of changing place-names in the islands, Woolf refers to ‘linguistic and ethnic replacement’ as though the two must go hand in hand (277): this despite the fact that elsewhere he discusses at length the difficulties of associating race or ethnicity with language and material culture.

The volume is very attractively presented, with the Hunterston Brooch gracing its royal blue cover. The text is accompanied by a range of clear and useful maps, a table of events, an extensive bibliography and

further reading notes, and a workable index. Woolf's eminently readable prose is marred in places by a lack of thorough copy-editing, but this cannot substantially detract from the value and pleasure to be had from reading it. The sheer scope and masterful handling of the material crammed into this book left me feeling as though I had absorbed multiple volumes bound in leather rather than a little paperback. Since it will join that handful of books that I will frequently want to carry around and dip into, I can only be grateful for this tardis-like quality.

*Pamela O'Neill*  
*Celtic Studies, University of Sydney*