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Although not without its flaws, Stephen Gethins' excellent book is an illuminating and timely discourse on Scotland's role and place as a nation in the modern world

Nation to Nation

Scotland's Place in the World

By **Stephen Gethins**
 Publisher **Luath Press**

This is an excellent and very timely book, bringing new understanding and illumination to a subject of vast importance and topicality and much in need of both, namely the place of the Scottish nation in the modern world.

Its whole thesis and story rest on three main pillars of perception and argumentation, two of them of enduring strength and validity, and the third, at least in the opinion of this reviewer, somewhat more flawed.

But never mind about that. Civilised disagreement is perfectly possible in discussing a work of this quality – even

if not in most of the polarised media nowadays – and we will come to that in a moment.

The first two sound pillars of wisdom on which this book rests are: One, that Scotland is an ancient nation of enormous talent and incredible global impact, all the more remarkable considering its relatively small population, and that it not only deserves the greatest respect as such but should also have a full role on today's international stage and in the comity of nations.

Two, that England has benefitted mightily from the alliance with its northern neighbouring nation over the centuries and owes a large part of its success and prosperity to Scottish leadership. At every turn, from the Enlightenment to the industrial revolution to the largest empire in recorded history (admire or detest it as you may) there have been Scots at the

forefront and at the spear-head of

British progress.

The third pillar on which Stephen Gethins rests his message seems the more crumbly one. This is that Scotland indeed has a place in the world to reassert and build, but that this should be

within the European Union from which its big neighbour has unwisely departed, and that this is where Scotland, so long a player in past European history, now belongs.

Here we have the old fallacy of confusion between the concourse of continental European nations and the construct of the European Union which comes down to us from the 20th century and from the then very different world.

But with a very much altered EU today, struggling against the strongly centrifugal forces of the digital age, is the centralising Brussels embrace really such a good harbour for smaller newcomers in Scotland's circumstances? And is that the place where Scotland is going to find the international role it feels it has been persistently denied by the Westminster government? The paths being

chosen by present-day Brussels hardly suggest that.

Yet Gethins is absolutely right

to focus on this aspect of the independence argument: that a nation needs a world place and role, and that role is defined by its relationships with allies, neighbours and world institutions – in short by its foreign policy – especially

as expressed through its soft and smart power deployment.

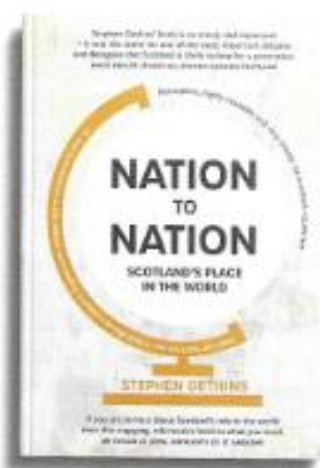
Pollsters may believe that foreign policy accounts for little in public opinion and put it well down the list of voters' concerns. But they are wrong. This is the real source from which pride and purpose, and a sense of national loyalty and direction, spring.

Far-sighted unionists in London should be working out how to offer Scotland not just the appearance but the genuine substance of this form of partnership and properly integrated involvement in the UK's overall international relations.

This is something Scotland has never had formally since the union began, despite the longish list of Britain's Scottish-born prime ministers, high administrators and leaders in every conceivable profession down the years. Scotland has had its subsidies and its support but as a nation it has for far too long been taken for granted.

British diplomats who pride themselves on deep knowledge of every nation on earth have forgotten the one right next door.

Nation to Nation will tell them how to begin repairing this deplorable omission – hopefully before it is too late. ■



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