Children and young people have certainly been rescued from the periphery of premodern Scottish history in this excellent volume of essays. *Children and Youth in Premodern Scotland* builds upon Ewan and Nugent’s impressive and ground-breaking volume on *Finding the Family in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland* (Ashgate, 2008). As the co-editors note: ‘young people were everywhere, and their experiences and lives have much to reveal about medieval and early modern society’ (p. 3). Adults may have thought that they shaped the lives of children and young people, but in Scotland, as elsewhere in Europe, they were capable of exercising ‘agency in determining their own experiences’ (p. 7). They were ‘crucial to society and the state’ as each new generation, regardless of whether they were high or low born, would ‘carry on the ideals of society’ (p. 11). There is laudable interdisciplinarity in this collection with chapters based on conventional historical sources alongside others that exploit poems, treatises, Gaelic songs, surviving artefacts of material culture and family portraiture. There is also a useful historiographical survey in the introduction for anyone unfamiliar with this historical topic.

The volume consists of three overlapping parts with three or four chapters in each section: ‘Experiences of childhood and youth’, ‘Representations of the young’ and ‘Constructing the next generation’. There is a final chapter that draws together many of the themes of the volume through a unique transcription of two letters by Elizabeth Melville.

In part one Mairi Cowan and Laura Walkling give a fascinating insight into children at the court of James IV well beyond the immediate royal family, ranging from Moorish girls to the offspring of royal mistresses. Cathryn Spence then deftly discusses the world of female apprentices in early modern Edinburgh; they are difficult to locate and have thus rarely received any attention from scholars. The material embellishing craft of perling emerges here as a very significant area of female work. Janay Nugent’s chapter on the fostering of Campbell children reveals an important aspect of elite children’s lives within the Gàidhealtachd. Archibald Campbell was only four when he was fostered within the household of Colin Campbell of Glenorchy, but his mother’s letters reveal that although separated from Archibald she was well informed, and often anxious, about his progress. The last chapter in this section by Stuart
Campbell on the material culture of childhood is fascinating and very well illustrated. Children’s toys that blended their ‘work, education and play’ (p. 86) are skilfully brought back to life from various museum collections in Scotland.

Part two starts with another discussion of the fosterage of noble children in Gàidhealtachd by Anne Frater, but this chapter focusses on song. These songs depict the caring relationship between foster-parent and foster-child, and birth-mother and child. They reflect a world that would eventually become lost when the educational requirements of the Statues of Iona (1609) took effect. Nel Whiting then analyses the depiction of children in Davis Allan’s 1780s portraits arguing that these works ‘contributed to the construction of childhood’ (p. 119) as they embodied adult concerns and interests. The little known world of slave children is the subject of Dolly MacKinnon’s thought-provoking chapter. The relationship between aristocrat or merchant owners and their slaves underpins this research, particularly where ‘slave children were claimed by their white fathers through acts of manumission’ (p. 121). Some were even freed and became household servants, but they sadly all remained unequal to white children. The relationships explored by Katie Barclay in her chapter on the long eighteenth century were far more affectionate. Scottish inheritance laws exuded ‘natural affection’ with the rights of children being recognised, not just those of the heir apparent. Children therefore ‘learned to prioritize their immediate family before other ties of affection’ (p. 151).

In part three Cynthia Neville discusses how the thirteenth-century Prince Alexander (1264–84) was schooled for future kingship. This fills a gap in our understanding about the childhood and youth of royal heirs in medieval times. The process was well conceived and designed ‘to ensure the smooth passage to power of the heir to the throne’ (p. 172). Heather Parker explores elite child betrothal before the Reformation, with a particular emphasis on how parents and guardians arranged marriages. Under canon law the minimum age for betrothal was seven, but some marriages were arranged for even younger children – though none actually married until puberty. It is interesting to see some cases where the child withdrew consent. However, those children who were wards could suffer from pressure from their guardians to marry against their will. Sarah Dunnigan takes a fresh look at the famous poetry of the Maitland Manuscripts to see how they imagine youth. This nicely balances with the earlier chapter on Gaelic song and is divided into sections on sons and wives and daughters. Sons were to be
conscious of power and kinship, whereas daughters were being prepared for virtuous marriage in an unequal world.

Jamie Reid Baxter’s concluding chapter shows the pious poetess Elizabeth Melville, Lady Culross, as concerned mother. Her son, James Colville, was an adult yet she felt compelled to warn him about the sin of pride. That he kept these letters demonstrates his ‘filial piety and his ultimate respect for his mother and her counsels’ (p. 215) well into adulthood.

*Children and Youth in Premodern Scotland* demonstrates that even though sources are few they can be well used by scholars to explore the book’s main themes. It is good to note that the children and youths discussed are from all levels of premodern Scottish society. This is a remarkable collection in a well-produced, if rather expensive, volume. It is good to see footnotes rather than endnotes throughout the text. The editors have also produced a very useful guide to further reading. It will clearly encourage others to research in this still emerging field.

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