

REVIEW: SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT

Jim Gilchrist

Arthur Herman, **The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World**, London: Fourth Estate, 2002, 402pp, hb, £20, ISBN 1841152757.

Alexander Broadie, **The Scottish Enlightenment**, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001, 251pp, pb, £9.99, ISBN 1841581518.

Michael Brown, **Francis Hutcheson in Dublin, 1719-1730: T(e) Crucible of his Thought**, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001, 240pp, hb £37.50, ISBN 1851826378.

'Here I stand at what is called the cross of Edinburgh, and can, in a few minutes, take 50 men of genius and learning by the hand.' So we evoke yet again the oft-repeated statement of that visiting Englishman, Mr Amyat (as quoted by Edinburgh printer and publisher William Smellie), reacting to what another visitor, Tobias Smollet, described as 'a hot-bed of genius' in his novel **Humphry Clinker**.

Edinburgh has become particularly identified with that extraordinary eruption of white-hot intellectual inquiry and creativity we term the Scottish Enlightenment, but as American scholar Arthur Herman makes clear in his spectacularly wide-ranging examination of both the causes and effects of that Enlightenment, 18th-century Glasgow and Aberdeen, as well as Edinburgh, constituted 'the triple wellsprings of the modern mind.'

Alexander Broadie, Professor of Logic and Rhetoric at Glasgow University and not one for sweeping statements, describes this period of Scottish history as 'one of the greatest moments in the history of European culture'.

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Times, as well as the location of the old mercat cross of Edinburgh, may have changed over the intervening two and a half centuries, but the image of Mr Amyat pressing the flesh with the strolling geniuses of Edinburgh remains an engaging one, and does have a certain resonance; one of the things which distinguished the Scottish Enlightenment from the wave of cultural and scientific ferment sweeping other parts of Europe was its innate sociability. The mid-18th century in Scotland may have been an age of critical reflection but the intellectual ferment of this 'republic of letters' simmered amid ale and oyster dens and clubs.

Herman declares that while in many people's minds the idea of 18th-century Enlightenment may evoke images of glittering French salons (where David Hume also made his mark), the Scottish version 'may have been less glamorous, but it was in many ways more robust and original. More important, it was at least as influential.'

'In fact,' he adds, 'if one were to draw up a list of the books that dominated the thinking of Europeans in the last quarter of the 18th century, the Scottish names stand out.' And he enumerates seminal volumes such as Adam Smith's **Theory of Moral Sentiments** and of course his **Wealth of Nations**, David Hume's **Treatise of Human Nature** and **Essays Political, Literary and Moral**, William Robertson's **History of Scotland** and **History of the Reign of Charles V**, and so on: the names, and their works, go on ... Adam Ferguson, philosopher and founder of modern sociology, John Millar, pioneer of modern political history, hugely influential mathematician and philosopher Thomas Reid, James Hutton's epochal revelations of geological time ... 'and at the top of the page', as Herman puts it, 'Francis Hutcheson's **System of Moral Philosophy** and Lord Kames's **Sketches of the History of Man**.'

Both authors look back to preceding centuries to ascertain the historical, political and cultural conditions which enabled this intellectual revolution to take place. Both have entitled their books **The Scottish Enlightenment**, but Herman, a historian and currently co-ordinator of the Smithsonian's Western Heritage programme, has of course appended his with that provocative subtitle, 'The Scots Invention of the Modern World'. His is an ambitious agenda indeed, pointing to the impact of Scottish thinking and inventiveness, from the Enlightenment period to modern times, on so many aspects of western civilisation, from education and theology to economics, medicine and engineering. In his book, the lad o' pairts, bolstered by a moderated

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Calvinist zeal, innate sense of democracy and the educational benefits of the 1696 'Act for Settling of Schools' went on to help seed the American Revolution and the resulting Constitution, spawn the European Romantic movement, create and run the British empire ... even inspire Karl Marx.

Herman is a champion of the enduring legacy of the anti-monarchical John Knox in embedding a strong democratic strand in the Scottish outlook, along with the influence of the scholar and tutor of James VI and I, George Buchanan. That, along with the high literacy rate, ensured that 'no other society in Europe was as broadly prepared for "take off" into the modern age as was 18th-century Scotland'. In his view, the Treaty of Union of 1707 was very necessary in launching an economic boom and, long term, was the making of Scotland, although, he adds, our distinctive law and university systems played an essential role in priming the country for enlightenment. Watching Herman pick up the ball of his argument and run with it can be an awe-inspiring experience, as you are tempted to envisage a Great Caledonian Conspiracy for world domination by Calvinist free-marketeters.

Unfair, perhaps; though not entirely. In general, however, of the two books, his is, if you like, the more cinematic approach, with its vast historical and geographical sweep, as well as some nice images – his description, for instance, of the post coach between Glasgow and Edinburgh connecting two major centres of the Enlightenment, bearing the likes of Millar and Smith and Robert Black. Broadie's, on the other hand is a much more direct, condensed approach, getting down to the nuts and bolts of how the Enlightenment worked and, as a philosopher himself, establishing the hard proofs and demonstrating facts, the philosophical arguments and propositions: the need to unpack these metaphors of 'light' and 'dark' – what was enlightened about it all and what was Scottish? He evokes the spirit of Burns's 'man o' independent mind' in setting out the prevailing conditions which enabled the Scottish Enlightenment: freedom of independent thought, willingness to challenge conventional wisdom; tolerance of other views and the ability to share thoughts and develop them in debate.

Neither writer paints too saintly a portrait of some of the period's greatest luminaries, Broadie pointing out that while Adam Smith abhorred slavery and Hume wrote unequivocally against it, the latter also made his now infamous comment about suspecting 'negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites'. Herman muses how another seminal figure, the law Lord Kames, who defended the slave Joseph Knight in a famous court case and won his

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freedom, 'on dictate of reason', nevertheless saw no conflict between a civilised legal system and handing out death sentences with a relish which horrified even his fellow judges.

The 'democratic intellect' may have been beckoning, but it seems the benign radiance of enlightenment still had its limitations, such as the Highland line. What has often struck this reviewer is that as what we tend to now regard as an intellectual golden age came to pass, Gaeldom was still succumbing to the brutal aftermath of the 1745 Rebellion. Broadie does not have much to say on this, while Herman grabs the bull by the horns, suggesting that it was necessary for Scottish whigs to defeat Jacobitism to allow the birth of the Enlightenment, that the collapse of the Jacobite threat and an already faltering clan system 'released a tremendous pent-up store of national energy'. This is a disturbing paradox: did it really take the undisputed atrocities of Drumossie Moor to actualise the essentially humanitarian potential of the Enlightenment?

Herman does recognise 'a sense of loss, of something missing from the modern cultural universe', but there remains in his book a sense of Gaeldom written off as a culture. It would be interesting, perhaps, to hear a scholarly Gael's riposte to this; for as the author himself acknowledges, even George Buchanan, who helped forge the democratic seeds of enlightenment in Scotland, was a speaker of Gaelic and Scots, as well as of Greek and Latin. (Speaking of Drumossie, Herman attributes it to Aberdeenshire, rather than Inverness-shire, one of a few incidental gaffes which perhaps come with the outsider's view, such as a 'Writer at the Signet', or a bizarre reference to the 'Lothian Mountains'.)

Even at the time luminaries were questioning how enlightenment could spring from such apparently unpropitious roots. David Hume reflected: 'Is it not strange that at a time when we have lost our Princes, our Parliaments, our independent government, even the Presence of our chief Nobility, are unhappy in our accent and pronunciation, speak a very corrupt Dialect of the Tongue which we make use of, is it not strange, I say, that in these Circumstances, we should really be the People most distinguished for Literature in Europe?'

Behind it all looms the benign figure of Glasgow university philosopher and teacher Francis Hutcheson - 'Europe's first liberal in the classic sense', according to Herman - who argued against the Hobbesian view of man's natural state as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short', and believed that we

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are all born with a God-given moral sense. His thinking ultimately informed Thomas Jefferson's inclusion of 'the pursuit of happiness' in the Constitution of the United States.

Hutcheson, however, was actually born in County Down, Ireland, the son of a Presbyterian minister, though educated in Scotland, and Michael Brown's study **Francis Hutcheson in Dublin, 1719-1730** traces the philosopher's time in the Irish capital, of which he remained greatly fond throughout his life (he died of a fever contracted while visiting there in 1746). In Dublin he ran a Presbyterian academy, at a time when the Presbyterian community was still regarded with suspicion by the Church of Ireland state, and the taint of heterodoxy could still result in one being socially ostracised and pilloried. Brown includes a wonderful anecdote about Hutcheson deputising for his father one Sunday at kirk and an irate member of the congregation later complaining to Hutcheson senior: 'Your silly loon, Frank, has fashed a' the congregation wi' his idle cackle; for he has been babbling this oor about a gude and benevolent God ...' So much for the visionary whose thinking would inform intellectual reform from Scotland to America.

Under the patronage of Robert Molesworth, first Viscount Swords, Hutcheson was accepted into a circle of like-minded, free-thinking men striving to come to grips with the issues arising in the fast-changing capital. Molesworth's often, though not entirely, enlightened policies clearly had their effect on the young man; not least the Viscount's ambitious landscaping ventures at his estate at Brackdenstown, battling to improve his environment amid a ruinous rural economy, and probably colouring Hutcheson's writings on aesthetics.

Hutcheson also became a frequent contributor to the influential **Dublin Weekly Journal**, edited by the Presbyterian poet James Arbuckle, arguing for the civilising effect of society over and beyond the state. The views on improvement and social virtue which would so sway luminaries such as Adam Ferguson and David Hume (with whom Hutcheson eventually fell out over Hume's 'lack of warmth in the cause of virtue') were shaped in a Dublin in which Jonathan Swift was railing at the aristocracy's disregard for seething poverty and disaffection.

Hutcheson has been described as an intellectual ancestor of the United Irishmen's uprising of 1798, although Brown gives this latter claim only brief attention, describing his influence as one of 'blood ties and intellectual affiliation'. Hutcheson's friend and colleague Thomas Drennan was the father

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of the United Irishmen's leader, William Drennan., who adopted Hutcheson's phrase, 'the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers'.

Alexander Broadie, like Hutcheson a philosophy teacher at Glasgow University, comments that failure in the past to acknowledge the inheritance of the Scottish Enlightenment 'has led to a serious distortion in the received history of Scottish culture'. This timely clutch of books makes an invaluable contribution to our greater appreciation of this extraordinary period.

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