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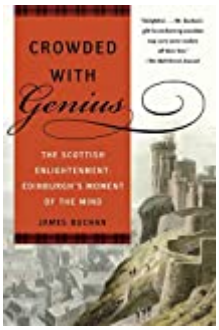

James Buchan. *Crowded with Genius–The Scottish Enlightenment: Edinburgh's Moment of the Mind.* New York: Harper Collins, 2003. xii + 436 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-055888-8; $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-06-055889-5.

Reviewed by Alexander Murdoch (School of History and Classics, University of Edinburgh)

Published on H-Albion (February, 2005)

Capital of the Mind

Not another book on the Scottish Enlightenment! Yet James Buchan accomplishes what no one has satisfactorily achieved before: he has put the Scottish Enlightenment within the covers of a single book. Whether the Enlightenment can be understood solely through the prism of a single nation or a single city remains questionable, but Buchan writes so well the reader will scarcely care. This is a book written with genuine power and learning that cannot be restrained within an academic straightjacket. The only error I could detect in a careful reading of the text was the curious identification of the notorious Irish murderer in Edinburgh in 1828 as Thomas, rather than William Burke. Was Buchan thinking of another Irishman or was this a simple slip of the pen? The intrusion of Burke and Hare in the text demonstrates that Buchan is not an uncritical historian of Edinburgh's moment of the mind. Robert Louis Stevenson, who grew up amidst the self-esteem it generated and left as its legacy (and who is described by Buchan as a lucid critic), wrote that "Edinburgh worshipped itself in the mirror of passing time" by the late nineteenth century. It still harbors hopes of a new information driven Enlightenment in the twenty-first century.

Buchan, a novelist, has read most of the relevant literature generated by the Scottish Enlightenment industry of the second half of the twentieth century. For those who know, much of the text reflects the painstaking research of scholars such as Richard Sher (who is quoted) and Nicholas Phillipson (who is not). But Buchan has read most of the primary texts produced by the Scottish Enlightenment as well as books and articles about them. He also has the linguistic skills in Classics, French, and Scots (but not Gaelic) to fully comprehend many of the nuances of Scottish Enlightenment culture beyond the understanding of mere Anglophones. The illustrations are well chosen and thoughtfully captioned, a delight to encounter in a book such as this, and the use of selections from the splendidly unique etchings John Kay created in Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century at the heading of each chapter is an exquisite additional detail, although the jacket design for the U.S. edition does not match the quality of that for the original U.K. publication. Why do U.S. publishers believe that Scotland can only be represented by old buildings? My favorite of the captions Buchan provides for his illustrations is that for the plan of the first Edinburgh New Town of the eighteenth cen-

tury: "Heavenly city of the philosophers or suburbs on the cheap?"

This is a well-written book. Adam Smith's "invisible hand" "pardons errors and makes good transgressions: wields, as it were, an invisible moral brush and dust pan" (p. 120). The Scottish Presbyterian legacy of the seventeenth century represented "religious revolutions that legislate for eternity but subsist in time" (p. 62). When Buchan quotes Smith on the link between the rise of commerce in the economy with the rise of prose in literature, "no one ever made a bargain in verse," he adds "any more than anyone ever wrote a believable tragedy in a Lothian manse" in reference to John Home's *Douglas* (p. 130). James Hutton's "*The Theory of the Earth* was the swan song of the Scottish intellect in its heroic phase. A mental enterprise that began with Hume's *Treatise*, passed through Stewart's and Smith's *Inquiries*, Ferguson's *Civil Society* and Millar's *Origins of Ranks* ended in a timeless chaos of shattered rock.... God has departed but has left His earth in perfect working order. It is that optimism that mankind today, as he surveys the ruins of his own making, cannot share" (p. 299).

For many of those drawn to the study of the Scottish Enlightenment, it began with the British revolutions of 1688 and ended with the death of Sir Walter Scott and the reform of the British constitution in 1832. For Jamie Buchan it began with the "Brigadoon moment" (this reviewer's words, not Buchan's) of the 1745 rebellion led by Bonnie Prince Charlie, and ended with the departure of Robert Burns from Edinburgh at the end of the 1780s to return to farming in southwest Scotland. In one of the most original chapters in the book, Buchan plumbs the profound achievements of both Burns and the Edinburgh poet Robert Fergusson ("bursary boy and tavern rat," p. 317) and sets them against the bourgeois sentimentality propagated by Edinburgh lawyers Henry Mackenzie and Sir Walter Scott, founding fathers with Goethe of European Romanticism. The last lines in the book refer to Scott's stage management of the royal visit by George IV to Edinburgh in August 1822 (the first by a reigning monarch since 1641): "Through [Scott] it is possible to experience the history of Edinburgh twice: once as disaster [1745], and once as daydream" (p. 340).

It is the sentimental dream of timeless and commercial history packaged as literature (and now television) that created "heritage" as a replacement for history, sustained by a reading public that Buchan describes as "solemn, earnest, puritanical, non aristocratic, practical, warm hearted, class conscious, feminist, optimistic" (p. 303). There is a hard edge beneath the alluring patina of this book. It goes beyond the picturesque. Like the work of any good novelist, it should be read with care.

Citation: Alexander Murdoch. Review of Buchan, James, *Crowded with Genius–The Scottish Enlightenment: Edinburgh's Moment of the Mind.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10253