



Richard Rodger. *The Transformation of Edinburgh: Land, Property and Trust in the Nineteenth Century.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xix + 540 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-78024-7.



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Published on H-Urban (October, 2002)

Most great cities have a dominant image. Edinburgh is known for its ancient castle - high above the city, on a great volcanic rock, it dominates the skyline and makes its presence known each day with the one o'clock cannon fire from the ramparts. The second image of Edinburgh is formed around the New Town—as both a physical reality, that is a large-scale, planned, eighteenth-century housing development in the classical style—but also as an ideal and aspiration towards a new type of polite, civilised urban living consistent with the Enlightenment. The association with elite and high culture, as represented in the Castle and the Georgian New Town, then gives rise to a third image of Edinburgh—the Festival City, home to one of the oldest and greatest arts festivals in the world. But like most modern city-images, which are actively encouraged by commerce-driven city authorities and the tourist industry, there is a great deal of collective blindness in how the city is represented. For the simple fact is that what we see today in Edinburgh is largely a product of the Victorian age—and it is the nineteenth-century city that is the focus of the study reviewed here.

Richard Rodger is Professor of Urban History and Director of the Centre for Urban History at the University of Leicester. For many years he has also been the editor of the prestigious journal *Urban History*, published by Cambridge University Press. He knows a lot about cities, and

he certainly knows a great deal about Edinburgh, as the quite formidable list of archives and documents that were consulted in the making of this book reveal. *The Transformation of Edinburgh* is by any standards a remarkable piece of scholarship, and my only criticism—which I may as well make at the outset—is that it is so rich, so detailed in its arguments, tables and figures and so complex in its range of themes, that it is probably two if not three books combined in one, with a couple of chapters at the end that are disconnected from the primary concerns. The density of the material contained here demands very close reading, and I found it impossible to absorb it all and arrive at a broad synthesis of the object of the work as a whole. And because it is probably a unique undertaking—I cannot think of another city that has generated such a detailed and technically complex study—there is no opportunity for a fully explored context or comparison.

The main theme is building, and in particular the building of houses. It is new houses, and especially houses for the working classes in working class-dominated industrial suburbs that transformed the character and physical appearance of Edinburgh. The first part of the book is devoted to the institutional structures that controlled the availability of land for buildings and the systems of law—a type of feudalism—that emerged in Scotland to generate income from land once it had been

sold and buildings constructed. Behind these developments are some of the immutable features of Edinburgh's institutional and social life—the power of certain charitable trusts, which were run by lawyers and town councillors, the power of the church and the income needs of a large class of professionals, female annuitants and rentiers. One of the most important institutional players in the building history of Edinburgh was, and remains to this day, the Heriot Trust—a charitable foundation created in the first half of the seventeenth century for the education of children of impoverished or deceased city burgesses and freemen. Since the legal character of this body resulted in an investment strategy based on land purchase and estate development, the Heriot Trust, along with similar bodies created in later decades, came to own great parcels of the land in the vicinity of Edinburgh, that were later built on as the city expanded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The investment strategies of the Heriot and other trusts are detailed in the first section of the book, which then goes on to look at the complexities of the feuing system that had evolved by the nineteenth century. Scottish feuing, like ancient monarchical feudalism, was a device whereby the feudal superior—the original landowner—would maintain a financial interest in the property once sold, in perpetuity and heavily protected in law, in the form of an annual feu-duty. Land, in addition to generating an income, could also be feued under strict conditions that regulated the nature of building developments in order to protect investments. This part of the study, in which the evolution of the feudal system is outlined, is highly technical, but allows us to understand such issues as the rate at which land was released onto the market to allow building to take place, and the political and institutional machinations that went on behind the scenes in such seemingly innocuous charitable bodies as the Heriot Trust. The Church of Scotland was also a major player in Edinburgh landownership, being one of the foremost investors in heritable securities in Scotland and the contribution of this institution to the technical and legal aspects of land feuing, trusts and loans is detailed in the final part of this first section.

The most vivid section of this book, part 2, deals mainly with the spectacular career and business of Sir James Steel, a builder and property entrepreneur. Steel was born in 1829 into a tenant-farming family living south of Glasgow. He served a mason apprenticeship and entered business as a small-scale builder while still in his twenties, making extensive use of family loans. He went bankrupt in 1861, like many in an area of trade

that was notoriously cyclical, but, undeterred, he moved to Edinburgh and set up business again. When he died in 1904 he was one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the city; he had served as Lord Provost, had been knighted and had an income that amounted, in current prices, to several millions of pounds per year. He had played the property game with remarkable success, minimising risks on individual projects and maintaining a rolling programme of building to keep his business stable; he built hundreds of tenements through all parts of the city and was a major landlord. He mainly built for the working classes—and in the process transformed the physical appearance of suburban Edinburgh—but he also entered the lucrative, though often more speculative, upper end of the house market. As an entrepreneur engaged in both financial and building innovation, and as a major employer, James Steel was equal to the great industrialists of the second half of the nineteenth century—those in shipbuilding or textile manufacture—but his name is largely forgotten today, for his influence did not extend beyond the city. His story is however a spectacular reminder that the building of nineteenth-century cities provided major business opportunities for men of vision.

House building also inspired property ventures based on the principles of co-operation, particularly among the skilled working class, which was a well-represented group in Edinburgh. Some of these ventures are detailed in the final part of the book. 1861, the year that saw the bankruptcy of the young James Steel, also witnessed the formation of the Edinburgh Co-operative Building Company (ECBC) by a group of building workers. The company was to build over two thousand homes in the next five decades and offer previously unknown opportunities for ordinary working families to enter the realm of both home and share ownership. Inspired by Free-Church evangelicals and social campaigns for improved housing conditions for the poor, the ECBC pioneered a particular style of housing, then uncommon in Scotland, in the form of one- or two-story flatted cottages in short terraces, each house having its own separate entrance and often a small garden. This type of housing—they are now called “colony” flats—is found in all part of Edinburgh and remains popular through to the present, particularly among younger professional couples and that new phenomenon of urban life, the “singleton.” Colony flats were reputed to have an English character—though in fact they were of a unique design—and they certainly appealed to English skilled workers in nineteenth-century Edinburgh. Their great virtue was that they avoided the problems associated with the common tenement stair, which

could be a major source of nuisance and neighbour conflict, and had a village-like appearance, as they still have today. The achievements of the ECBC were remarkable, but like many similar bodies devoted to mutuality and cooperation, they soon came to be dominated by the petite bourgeoisie rather than the genuine working class, and share ownership became attractive to middle class women as part of the standard middle class portfolios of stable investments.

Private entrepreneurs and innovative building companies like the ECBC together transformed the physical extent and appearance of Edinburgh in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Georgian city, exemplified by the New Town, still existed of course, and was extended in some ways by the new terraced town-house

building to the west end of Edinburgh, the equivalent of London's Belgravia. But the reality of Edinburgh life for most people was more likely to be shaped by the long streets of austere, well-constructed working class tenements in an industrial suburb like Dalry, with its railway yards and breweries—or the villas and gardens, behind high garden walls, of middle class suburbs such as the Grange or Trinity. In exploring the development of this aspect of the Edinburgh urban experience, Richard Rodger has made a major contribution to our understanding of a city that should be better known in its other dimensions. He has also reminded us that so much of the evolution of cities in the past, like cities today, was controlled by institutions rather than individuals and defined in essence by the character of land law.

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Citation: Stana Nenadic. Review of Rodger, Richard, *The Transformation of Edinburgh: Land, Property and Trust in the Nineteenth Century*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

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