

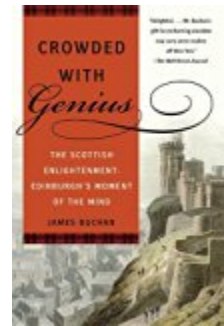
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James Buchan. *Crowded with Genius—The Scottish Enlightenment: Edinburgh’s Moment of the Mind*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. xi + 436 pp.

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Sociable Bachelors and Sentimental Society: Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment

Recent literature concerning the Enlightenment(s) of Europe has justifiably drawn attention to events north of the Tweed, where Scottish thinkers huddled against the cold, and fed on a diet rich in kail and weighty thoughts. While eighteenth-century intellectual movements on the Continent, particularly in France, were often contentious and filled with heated rivalries, the gentlemen of Scotland formed a much more cohesive community, a fact reflected in the overall tenor of the social and political theories that emerged from the clubs and associations that dotted the country itself and Edinburgh in particular. For James Buchan, the work of these thinkers was not a provincial effort, since they “laid the mental foundations for the modern world” through their investigations of history, philosophy, psychology, and physiology (p. 1). Buchan’s earlier foray into nonfiction, *Frozen Desire* (1997), provided a wide-reaching survey of the meaning of money throughout history and highlighted the important role of John Law in the disastrous Mississippi Scheme of 1721. In *Crowded with Genius*, Buchan focuses upon Law’s home of Edinburgh, seeking to uncover the confluence of ideas and attitudes that allowed this once-sleepy town to become one of the intellectual capitals of the eighteenth century.

Just as his earlier work ranged with ease from the ancient Greeks to Michael Milken, in *Crowded with Genius* Buchan shows a great mastery of the primary texts

written by Edinburgh luminaries during the Scottish Enlightenment. Through his well-written and thematically organized examination, Buchan paints a vivid picture of the physical and mental transformation of the city and its inhabitants. Buchan is eminently qualified to undertake this project and his writing style clearly and concisely explains the complex ideas that swirled about Edinburgh during the period between 1745 and 1780. This survey is enhanced by his close familiarity with the primary texts of the period, ranging from the philosophical treatises of Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith to the more local (if fabricated) *Ossian* forgeries (1762) of James MacPherson. The ample inclusion of lines from these sources allows Buchan to flesh out the nuances of the debates that consumed the town’s literati, often as they were themselves enjoying the culinary delights produced by the likes of David Hume, the great philosopher who announced in 1769 that “Cookery” was “the science to which I intend to addict the remaining Years of my life” (p. 199). Still, for modern historians seeking to understand this intellectual period, it should be noted that although Buchan’s examination clearly conveys the flavor of the eighteenth-century discussions, he does not explicitly ground this analysis in the recent literature concerning the Scottish Enlightenment (such as the work of Nicholas Phillipson, Richard Sher, or M. A. Stewart), but does show close familiarity with these modern assessments. Nonetheless, Buchan’s choice to focus on the original writings

themselves works quite well and gives the reader a thorough understanding of the issues at play amongst these thinkers.

Buchan traces the origins of Scottish intellectual fervor to the aftermath of the Jacobites' defeat in the Battle of Culloden Moor (1746). In his interpretation, this is an important point, since it allows him to highlight how the Edinburgh Enlightenment broke with earlier political and religious attitudes that acted as a barrier to Scotland moving into (or helping to create) the "modern" world. Still, this geographical and chronological focus upon Edinburgh does raise important points concerning his overall project. First, while this city was certainly a major lynchpin of intellectual life in Scotland during this period, what about other seats of erudition such as Glasgow and Aberdeen? Also, while Buchan does try to compare some of the intellectual trends evident in Scotland with those on the continent, this effort does little to provide the reader with a sense of the larger context within which these figures were working. For instance, even here Buchan's efforts are primarily directed toward French writers, eliding any consideration of other Celtic thinkers across the Irish Sea whose thought had an impact upon Scotland (with the notable exception of Francis Hutcheson). This intense concern for post-1746 Edinburgh also poses a related question concerning chronology. Although his observations concerning the spectacular growth of intellectual life following 1746 are convincing, it would be helpful if he could situate this analysis in a somewhat larger framework by addressing the influence of events such as the Union of 1707. Taken together, these minor criticisms are not meant to indicate that Buchan's study is merely a Scottish rebuttal to Jonathan Swift's "Injured Lady" (despite its publication in 1746), but rather to indicate two broad areas that would help nuance his thoughtful and targeted study.

The crux of Buchan's argument is that in order for Scotland to "prosper," it needed to cast aside longstanding religious and political traditions, namely the radically puritanical character of the Kirk and the popular support for Jacobitism (p. 23). Buchan explains the first of these issues through the story of Thomas Aikenhead, a university student who was charged with blasphemy in 1696 for denigrating the Bible in conversations with his friends. At his trial, Aikenhead pled for mercy based on his youth, his belief in the Trinity, and a solemn assertion of his contrition. Despite these signs of regret, Aikenhead was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging in January 1697. While this event was certainly not unusual for the time—consider the "warm" recep-

tion to John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) in Ireland—Buchan notes that in his address from the scaffold, Aikenhead claimed "he had come to doubt the objectivity of good and evil, and to believe that moral laws were the work of governments or men" (p. 57). In two senses, Buchan sees this trial as "haunting" Edinburgh for nearly a century: providing a negative model of the strict Puritanism that needed to be curbed and as a positive call for explaining social behavior as a product of humans, rather than as reflective of religious belief. Thus, when Buchan recounts a similar case waged against Hume in 1755 by religious traditionalists ("High-Flyers"), he is able to show the sea change in attitudes by the fact that all charges were dropped as a more moderate position came to dominate Edinburgh religion.

On a political level, Buchan argues that the effect of the Jacobite rebellion on the population of Edinburgh was extremely significant. Prior to 1745, lingering English suspicions of Scottish loyalties, coupled with a romantic attachment to the ideal of Highland "freedom," encouraged an insular culture in Edinburgh that took delight in distinguishing itself from its southern neighbors. In the aftermath of these events, Buchan notes that for some, English retribution provoked "authoritarian church and town politics, frantic expressions of loyalty to the House of Hanover, [and] attempts to reform Scottish pronunciation" (p. 54). While this was an important development, Buchan observes that a different attitude developed among the rising luminaries. Compared to their elders, the generation that came of age following the Forty-five was strongly devoted to Unionism and eschewed the traditional allegiance to the past, thereby allowing them to move in a more international (and "British") sphere. Thus, figures such as the lawyer Henry Hone were not seeking "to sacrifice Scottish national culture to southern politics but, by making it general, cosmopolitan, classical, businesslike, polite and loyal, to promote it" (p. 128). By broadening the scope of their inquiries to humanity in general, rather than Scotland in particular, these thinkers found a larger audience for their theories and were able to deepen the appeal of their work. Although not primarily concerned with the politics of the period, Buchan's stress on the growing concern among Edinburgh intellectuals for integrating themselves within this British framework also provides the basis for what was perhaps their most significant contribution to modern thought: their analysis of the human condition.

As Buchan clearly points out, eighteenth-century Edinburgh was a city teeming with a wide variety of social gathering places, and this convivial atmosphere was re-

flected in the ways these individuals explained the origins and nature of human society. Two ideas were at the core of this movement: a “progressive” view of history unfolding through a series of stages and a vision of human sociability, grounded in the idea of “sentiment,” that acted to bind individuals to one another. Diverse thinkers such as David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and John Millar all predicated their analyses upon a universal vision of historical development that suggested every human society passed through nearly identical stages (p. 130). Although these individuals disagreed over the ultimate mechanism by which a people moved from one stage to the next, they did share a belief that all civilizations passed through three (and at times four) distinct states. Whether spurred by psychological, economic, or sexual forces, this Scottish tradition held that humans became more refined and polished as they moved from the primitive age of hunting and gathering to a pastoral age, before culminating in the age of commerce. As Buchan notes, this commercial endpoint was seen as an ambivalent achievement, valorized by Hume and Smith, who contended that it improved both individuals’ manners and standard of living, but castigated by the likes of Ferguson (the “Scottish Cato”) who believed it undermined traditional “masculine” virtues (p. 226). Nonetheless, whether one supported an “Athenian” or “Spartan” virtue, Scottish thinkers agreed that it was essential to understand the bonds that united disparate individuals into civil society.

During the eighteenth century, Scottish thinkers became increasingly aware of the transformative power of “politeness” and “manners” on civil society, an observation that had been advanced earlier by Montesquieu. This language, termed “doux-commerce” by Albert Hirschman, stressed the “douceur of commerce.”[1] At the heart of this interpretation was an appreciation for the “softening” and “polishing” effects of commerce upon civilization. While this was most forcefully articulated in the works of Adam Smith, Buchan rightly stresses Francis Hutcheson’s influence in spurring Scottish interest in ideas of “disinterested benevolence” (p. 70). Throughout the period examined by Buchan, theories of interpersonal relations were often premised upon ideas of “sympathy,” as notions of “goodwill” toward others were seen as proof that sociability was an essential part of human nature. While it was conceded that self-interest was a potent force, even Smith (the “apostle of amoral modern cap-

italism”) gave places of prominence to “sympathy” and “sociability” in his description of human relations in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (pp. 120, 138). According to this view, individuals were linked by mutual needs and reciprocal obligations grounded in an innate sense of sociability common to all humans, rather than in objective, timeless standards; in effect, Aikenhead’s earlier prediction concerning the role of governments and humans in constructing morality was vindicated. Thus, the self-described goal of these thinkers became identifying and understanding the place of sympathy within human nature, seeking to show how it influenced the progress of history and acted as the basis of commercial society.

Sociability and sentiment were certainly important factors to consider, but Buchan argues that Scottish thinkers also highlighted the role of women in the process of “refining” society, despite the fact that Edinburgh was predominantly a “bachelor society” (p. 241). He notes that Edinburgh women were seen as operating within a system that divided morality along gender lines, as it was commonly believed that they possessed a “superior moral sense” that was not necessarily designed to improve themselves, but rather to “make men better, in the sense of both more comfortable and more virtuous” (pp. 245-246). In particular, women were seen as contributing to the formation of the “man of feeling,” an individual whose ability to relate to others was seen as essential for the proper functioning of society. For Buchan this, rather than the philosophy of Hume or the economic theories of Smith, was the true contribution of the Scots to the western world. He contends, “sentiment, not reason, was the great social invention of the second half of the eighteenth century ... sentiment was nothing less than modernity” (p. 302). Here, the true value of the Scottish Enlightenment becomes evident, as Buchan links the idea of sentimentality to modern notions of propriety underlying movements for civil and political rights throughout the world today. Thus, in the end, Buchan’s work serves as an important and accessible window into an era whose thoughts still reverberate, giving his readers a deeper understanding of the origins and role of morality in a society often seen as being bereft of “objective” standards.

Note

[1]. Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 59.

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