

## Crowded with Genius

*The Scottish Enlightenment: Edinburgh's Moment of the Mind*

J.Buchan

(Jan 22) February 6 -14, 2009

Edinburgh is given. As are the rudiments of Scottish History. In 1709 Scotland became united with England, and in 1745 there was an attempt of a certain Charles a descendant of the disposed King James to reassert its independence. The battle at Culloden stymied his half-hearted effort, and after that the union with England was sealed, and the Jacobites were permanently in retreat. Supposedly this tipped the balance and Edinburgh had to redirect its energies, and hence this sudden flare of genius. Or so one surmises this being the drift of the authors thinking.

The book is a confused hodgepodge of fragmented anecdote and incomplete analysis amidst a welter of haphazardly collected information, charming maybe to the locals of Edinburgh, but rather tedious to the outsider, who would have appreciated some pointers.

Why Edinburgh? A provincial capital perched with its castle on a steep hill, mired in poverty and disease, as most cities were at the time. It apparently had an intellectual tradition, a medical college stemming from the 17th century at least as well as a University, but how old? Crucial information is withheld from the reader, whom instead is bombarded with a profusion of arcane trivia. We are treated to detailed lists of what buildings were built and when and where, and also how much they cost. Interesting maybe to an Edinburgh resident but rather indifferent fare to somebody who has only a vague and sketchy conception of the geography of the city. We learn that the city increased in wealth, that the number of brothels and street-walkers increased exponentially in the last decades of the 18th century, a detail which is puzzling and pointless unless put into a wider context. It can of course be interesting to mire an account of spiritual life and flight in the actual physical conditions present at the time. It is rather easy for us to identify and sympathize with flights of abstract fancy (especially if they have by dint of habit and tradition already become securely ensconced in our minds), but harder to commiserate by the actual quotidian circumstances those intellectuals had to contend with. Yet, even here where the main purpose of the book is surely to be sought, the author fails in spite of liberal use of quotation and peripheral fact.

An intellectual of the 18th century was most likely a clergyman or a lawyer, those being the established channels to which higher education led. Those professions, venerable as they might be, hardly sufficed to satisfy a curious and independent mind, such thus followed their amateur interests and kept their professions as merely a source of income. In fact a tradition kept alive well into the 19th century, and vestiges of it can of course still be seen in various academic institutions around the world. Now the book is centered around a cast of characters, some universally known, others of more local prominence. David Hume and Adam Smith are the two names we most often associate with philosophy of a Scottish provenance, and the author provides some anecdotes to flesh out the pictures we may

have formed of those minds. Hume was a hypochondriac youth with lofty ambitions, and indeed the most daring and original in his thoughts were formed in his late teens and early twenties and after that he did add very little to his accomplishments. Few philosophers have the courage of their theoretical convictions, and Hume was a sociable fellow, who sought refuge from the starkness of his philosophy in a pleasant life with friends, consorting with pretty women, playing backgammon and cooking for his parties. He had a brush with the legal profession, which he predictably loathed, then it does not become quite clear how he supported himself. Through the sales of his books, through aristocratic sponsorship or acting as a tutor to the progeny of those well-heeled? Maybe a combination of all. The attempts to secure for him an academic position seems to have foundered, maybe because of the notoriety of his views. He spent time in Paris, befriended Rousseau, whom he invited to Scotland to find a sanctuary, but with whom he soon fell out. References to Hume are strewn throughout the book, but they do not really add up, only confirming that he was a durable presence in the city. As to his philosophy Buchan has next to nothing to contribute, save that of course his stoicism brought out by an atheism from which he did not waiver, not even, to the horror of Boswell, on his deathbed. Buchan wonders though if Hume was a post-modernist professing a relativity of knowledge, which if taken literally, would have undercut the empirical scientific advances which might have been the enduring accomplishments of the Scottish enlightenment. If so Buchan is out of his depths.

Adam Smith was his junior with a few years, knew him well, and was assigned as his executioner. Smith too was a bachelor, maybe with an even more retiring attitude towards women. He went to Oxford, was professor at Glasgow, but did live with his mother, and after her death with a cousin of sorts. He is of course well-known for his 'Wealth Of Nations', a book that had had its precursors in Scotland as well as abroad, and which had also been forerun by a more juvenile effort of his with a stronger moral sentiment than was allowed to survive into his more mature works. His 'invisible hand' although not coined by him remains the catch-phrase with which his work is characterized. His grand leap was to divorce morality from economics, to postulate that the very selfishness which we normally censure, is in fact the very motivation that keeps the economic wheels turning and reassures an efficient distribution of resources and rational decisions. Luxury, rather than to be resented should be lauded, because through the vanity of the rich, opportunities for employment are created and wealth is trickled down. It is hard not to see Adam Smith as the Godfather of market-liberalism, yet market fundamentalists of today would probably have much to criticize him for, and a closer reading of his work would no doubt reveal a far greater complexity. But if so, Buchan is hardly the man for the task.

Hume and Smith were not isolated, they thrived in an social circle studded with lesser originality, yet without which those plants would have withered for lack of proper nourishment. It is the duty of an author of such a book like this to ferret out forgiven names and at least temporarily rescue them from predestined oblivion. People like Steuart, Millar and Monbodo are brought forth, quaint to the eyes of posterity, but no doubt commanding respect and awe in their own time. But an intellectual milieu is not foremost that of thinkers and scientists, but perhaps more crucially that of literati, who keep a lively conversation going, who publishes themselves in periodicals with non-trivial circulations, and thus invite the curiosity and engagement of a wider educated public, in the way the

monograph can never do. John Home, a clergyman dabbled into the writing of plays, meant to rival those of Shakespeare and Racine, not to mention the Classics of Antiquity. His masterpiece - Douglas, intended to both revive and create a Scottish Myth, is now deservedly forgotten, yet it is of course instructive to learn with what praise it was originally received by people, such as Hume, who surely should have known better. This is of course a familiar phenomenon, how the truly grand of an epoch are often obscured by more topical ventures, and thus that history is indeed, in the words of Coolingwood, a reconstruction of the past in the present, and hence not necessarily to be recognized by contemporaries (would they have a chance to do so). Edinburgh of the second half of the 18th century is of course the Edinburgh of Boswell, that busybody who was the worlds most famous groupie. Also an inveterate drinker and womanizer, when not spellbound by his superiors, as well as an indefatigable chronicler. Needless to say the charms of Boswells journals were not present to those who shared his scene, and it is doubtful whether they would have been susceptible to them, had they been available to their scrutiny. The surviving poets of the times were of course James MacPherson and Robert Burns. The former mainly as a perpetrator of a hoax, although at the time that was not entirely obvious, the latter as a pioneer using the Scottish idiom for lyrical purposes. The Songs of Ossians were a putative translation of a vanishing epic which MacPherson had managed to rescue from oblivion through his forays into the Highlands. But even during his life his competence as a Gaelic scholar was cast in doubt, and suspicion as to the veracity of his claims were rife. Hume though, that famous skeptic, seems to have been taken in, at least for some time. Whether MacPherson was exposed or not during his lifetime, is one of those facts a reader is curious to know, but which the author fails, either out of lack of knowledge or distraction, to inform the same. Burns popularity has survived into our times as the National poet of Scotland. Putatively a mere ploughman sired in the Scottish soil, his lowly origins were taken by a delighted Edinburgh society, as a guarantee of being the 'real thing', a genius, out of whose font stanzas emerged without effort. He was a young lusty man, having made a few girls pregnant, the father of one of whom took an intense dislike to him. He took the city by storm, secured some stipends, but, according to Buchan, being unable like a more accomplished careerist such as MacPherson, to wrangle out a more permanent commitment. He flirted and dallied, but eventually went back to his lass and married her against the blessings of her kin. He died young (at 37) but of his last decade Buchan is silent. But Burns was not a genius sprung unheralded out of the Scottish Earth, he had a predecessor in Robert Ferguson, another young man who combined learning with local idiom, but who was of a depressed temperament and succumbed to death already at twenty-four, and would probably for the championship of Burns have rested in permanent obscurity.

A final man of learning and accomplishment was James Hutton, whose phrase 'No vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end' blithely summarizes his overriding insight. He was a pioneering geologist who extrapolated the processes observable in the present, concluding that the earth had no history as we think of history, but had always existed and would always exist, mountains being lifted up and then leveled by erosion in an unending cycle. This clear attack on the Biblical creation story was to have momentous consequences for the next century. And of course if anything it was in the spirit of enlightenment, reading

the book of nature rather than the text supposedly handed down to us by the ultimate authority. Hume, Adams and Hutton provide indeed the triumvirate of lasting Scottish thought from that charmed century. This would be replaced by a more romantic one, and although Scotland, an industrialized country by now, continued to provide scientists of repute, the one name most likely to attach to that of the readers imagination, or at least that of the author, is Walter Scott, repeatedly referred to in the book, and almost usurping its epilogue.

February 15, 2009 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se