

The First Scottish Enlightenment: Rebels, Priests and History

By Kelsey Jackson Williams

ISBN: 9780198809692

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, £70.00

I really like this book. It liberates Jacobitism from a life sentence as the backward-looking antithesis of intellectual progress – the grim-faced polemical darkness that Enlightenment chased away. In so doing, it rescues the decades between 1680 and 1740 from the historiographical hinterland, at last giving due recognition to the vibrancy of a Europe-wide scholarly network centred on Aberdeen. A study of this kind is long overdue, and Williams has addressed that need admirably.

The book's central argument is that early eighteenth-century Scotland was home to an intellectual culture that was rigorous, sceptical and empirical (in the sense of being evidence-based). Because it was primarily Jacobite in outlook and Catholic or Episcopalian in creed, however, it was subsequently rejected as subversive and alien by the Pro-Hanoverian Presbyterians who came to dominate Scotland's intelligentsia in the years following the 1745 rising. Modern historians, Williams argues, have accepted that partisan interpretation far too readily. It might even be suggested that we have allowed our own preference for constitutional systems of government to blind us to the possibility of an intellectual milieu that was at once cutting-edge and absolutist. Williams does not go that far, but it is hard to deny his assertion that the period is ripe for reappraisal.

Williams is absolutely right to make that claim and his book makes its case with persuasive aplomb. However, the association with Enlightenment, writ large in the title, brings with it some complications. In his introduction, Williams discusses definitions of Enlightenment and highlights how amorphous and controversial the term has become. Yet he does not then provide a robust definition of his own which legitimises the application of the label to this earlier flowering of Scottish erudition. Nor, as Williams admits, is there much exploration of the connections between what he calls the 'first Enlightenment' and the later period with which the term is more usually associated. The definition of Enlightenment that the study implies is that championed by Alexander Brodie; 'the historical age of the historical nation'. Indeed, the book is primarily about how new forms of scholarship transformed Scotland's relationship with its own past in the years following the Glorious Revolution. That is certainly a legitimate means of justifying the inclusion of the rebels and priests that Williams discusses beneath the umbrella of Enlightenment. But the case for doing so could be made more overtly. The book has little to say about other branches of knowledge commonly associated with the later eighteenth century, such as moral philosophy, political economy, what we would today call sociology and anthropology, and also the physical sciences. That is not to say that it should address those themes – in fact they were largely absent from Scottish scholarship in the early 1700s. But if, as it seems, the term 'Enlightenment' is here being applied to this earlier period on the basis of what are essentially antiquarian continuities, then a more explicit defence of that approach is needed.

That said, the decision to associate the scholars and networks under review with Enlightenment, rather than assessing them entirely on their own terms, is an understandable one. It serves to address a long-standing distortion in our

interpretation of Scotland's past and is also likely to attract greater attention from potential readers to the important points that this book makes. Nor do these definitional caveats undermine the book's broader quality, value, or significance. Indeed, Williams closes by pointing out that the celebrated historical culture of nineteenth-century Scotland owes more to the early 1700s than to the heyday of Enlightenment later in the century.

The book's structure and coverage are laudably thorough and effective. The first couple of chapters argue that this 'early Enlightenment' began during the 1680s as James VII and II tried to construct an intellectual edifice around the idea of a Catholic absolutist monarchy. It continued to grow after 1688 as the establishment-in-exile sought to justify its ongoing existence, and was fed by pre-existing traditions of Episcopalian humanist scholarship centred on Aberdeen and its environs. The middle sections then consider how new techniques of systematic analysis and a new emphasis on evidence, particularly from manuscripts and archives, informed a radical reimagining of Scotland's past. This included debunking the myth of the ancient monarchy and reconstructing Scotland's early medieval history in ways that still shape our understandings of the period today. It also led to new approaches to material culture and geography, genealogical research, and even stimulated the creation of a specifically Scottish literary canon. The final chapter is a fascinating investigation of who was actually reading and paying for the scholarship that the rest of the book discusses. The recurring point throughout is that it was Jacobite networks of Catholic and Episcopalian scholars and patrons that were at the forefront of these endeavours. These small groups of political and religious outsiders, based in the rural north east, welded a level influence out of all proportion to their number and standing. Despite their marginalisation under the 1688 settlement, they managed to fundamentally reshape how Scotland's past was understood by the Whig-Presbyterian establishment.

Overall, this is an excellent book. It addresses long-standing misconceptions about Scottish intellectual culture before the 1745 rebellion and acts as a much-needed corrective to common but erroneous assumptions about the character and influence of Jacobite scholarship. If the efforts it makes to connect its subject matter with the totemic label of Enlightenment feel strained, that is forgivable given the neglect of this earlier period in recent work on Scottish intellectual history.

Richard Marsden, the Open University