

Book Reviews

Post-1800

JOHN W. ARTHUR. *Brilliant Lives: The Clerk Maxwells and the Scottish Enlightenment*.
Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016. Pp. 358. \$37.99 (cloth).
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As John Arthur notes, his book *Brilliant Lives: The Clerk Maxwells and the Scottish Enlightenment* is not so much about the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1879) as it is about his antecedents—or rather about the remarkable background that helps explain his singular contributions and place in history. It is also a work of family history in that it seeks to understand its subject in terms of lineage and kinship networks. The accomplishments of Maxwell (common usage drops the first half of his name) in electromagnetism and statistical mechanics regularly place him on lists just behind Einstein and Newton in importance, though he is still not particularly well known outside of Scottish studies circles and the physics community. With *Brilliant Lives*, Arthur certainly seeks to remedy this obscurity through vigorous advocacy for Maxwell's significance, but he largely concentrates on the question of what kind of a family would produce such a scientist. Was Maxwell a *sui generis* mind, or can we find some explanation for his genius in his genealogy? Arthur contends the latter, and to this end provides an extremely detailed description of the Clerk Maxwell family's place in Scottish history.

Arthur begins with extensive genealogical tables and then provides a fifty-page treatment of Maxwell's life and work. The life writing draws heavily on the Campbell and Garnett biography of 1882 and does not provide much that is new. The meat of the book, however, is Arthur's encyclopedic coverage of five generations of Maxwell's family. It is a fairly complicated story (jumps back, forth, and sideways in time are needed) of Jacobite rebellions, legal wrangling over estate ownership, and questionable marriages. We find the origin of the Clerk Maxwell compound name in maneuverings required for ensuring the inheritance of lands by particular members of the family. The reader is provided with extreme details, such as who rented the house where Maxwell was born over the course of nearly sixty years.

Brilliant Lives is the result of a prodigious amount of research. Arthur does a good job reconstructing complicated events from often fragmentary records. However, it is not always

evident how the family history provided helps us understand Maxwell better. The influence of Maxwell's father on shaping his ideas and outlook is fairly clear (and has been noted before), but it is challenging to find similar threads over the course of these five generations. Similarly, the book's subtitle suggests that the story of the Clerk Maxwells will help illuminate the Scottish Enlightenment. Unfortunately, we do not learn much about the Scottish Enlightenment that is not already widely known, and in fact we come away feeling that Clerk Maxwells are not particularly representative of the era. Some closer connection with the scholarly literature might have been useful here: the first source cited on the Scottish Enlightenment is a 1986 travel guide for Edinburgh, the second a *Wikipedia* article.

Those readers interested in Maxwell's family will certainly find this book interesting. The extraordinary amount of detail and archival work will also probably be useful for anyone studying eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Scottish genealogy or the lives of the landowning classes. It is a rich (if in some ways old-fashioned) portrait of a family line that has an especially bright culmination in the Victorian era's most important physicist.

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GARETH ATKINS, ed. *Making and Remaking Saints in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. Pp. 283. \$110.00 (cloth).
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Making and Remaking Saints in Nineteenth-Century Britain is a compelling collection that uses sixteen focused essays to tell a larger story about the intersections of religion, politics, and national identity in the nineteenth century. In the introduction, editor Gareth Atkins points towards that larger whole even as he recognizes that *Making and Remaking Saints* only scratches the surface of nineteenth-century ideas about sainthood and sanctity. Atkins frames the volume as an attempt to show how saints and the idea of sanctity provided a site at which to debate many political and intellectual questions of the day. The saints, Atkins argues, challenged nineteenth-century thinkers to confront their own connections to the past, to grapple with discontinuities with that past, and to struggle with the meaning of revealed religion in an increasingly secularized age.

Each of the essays in *Making and Remaking Saints* tells its own story even as it suggests the volume's broad narrative, and the range covered by those stories makes it difficult to characterize the collection in its entirety. Nevertheless, the essays seem to fall into three groups. Some seek to make sense of the cultural meanings of figures like St. Paul and the Virgin Mary, who unquestionably were part of the history of all sects and denominations of English Christianity. Michael Ledger-Lomas's chapter on Paul typifies this category. Paul was central to all varieties of nineteenth-century Christianity; at the same time, however, Paul's miraculous experience of a risen Christ posed challenges to increasingly skeptical, liberal Protestants who, as Ledger-Lomas demonstrates, went to great lengths to preserve Paul's status as exemplar by reading his experience in psychological rather than miraculous terms. A second set of essays focuses on saints whose lives became sites at which religious and national identities intersected. Andrew R. Holmes, in his essay "Patrick," for instance, argues that Irish Presbyterians validated a non-Roman Catholic version of Irish identity by finding in Patrick the founder of a "primitive, proto-Presbyterian Church" (83). Similarly, Lucy Underwood, in her essay on the English Catholic martyrs, shows how martyrs of Reformation-era England became both part of a conservative Roman Catholic story and part of the