

Bob Harris and Charles McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment 1740–1820*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. xx + 604pp. 147 b&w, 37 colour illustrations, 31 b&w tables, 8 b&w drawings. Bibliography. £130.00 hbk. £30.00 pbk.
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From a low base and against a background of exceptionally rapid agricultural and industrial development, Scotland experienced the fastest urbanization of any European country between 1750 and 1850. Big cities like Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen have attracted much of the attention of scholars interested in this fundamental shift in economic and social life. Yet like Wales, Ireland, Scandinavia and much of eastern Europe, the characteristic Scottish experience of urbanization was found in small and medium-sized towns. These are the focus of this substantial archive-based survey. Scotland had hundreds of burghs (*sic*) and not all could be studied. The authors therefore concern themselves mainly with two regions that saw particularly quick change – Perthshire and Angus in the east and Ayrshire in the west – while offering examples of towns from across Scotland; an appendix of ‘improvement profiles’ lists 26 burghs. Chapter 4 (‘A tale of five towns’: Selkirk, Irvine, Dunfermline, Kirkcudbright and Perth) exemplifies the marked differences in urban experience, even within the short time period covered by the book – and within a rather small geographic area.

The subjects covered naturally reflect the expertise of the authors and the resulting blend of (high) cultural and institutional history, architecture and archaeology is similar to that found in recent volumes about Scottish towns by Pat Dennison and her collaborators, most notably *Aberdeen before 1800* (2002) and *Painting the Town: Scottish Urban History in Art* (2013). Scottish urban historiography has a particular character that derives partly from the celebratory town histories that began to be published in the period this book covers. Harris and McKean, however, most closely model their work on A.J. Youngson’s seminal *The Making of Classical Edinburgh* (1966) and they share many of the concerns of Peter Borsay’s *The English Urban Renaissance* (1989). They see the Enlightenment as the motor of the ‘renewal and refashioning’ of Scotland’s towns, creating what Tom Markus once described as greater ‘order in space and society’. They believe the word ‘improvement’ speaks especially loudly in Scotland, for the spirit of the late Georgian age: not only in making people better through education, commerce and sociability, but also enhancing and embellishing material culture and the built environment. Thus, they focus in particular on a ‘silent revolution’ that involved a far-reaching ‘reordering of space’ within the towns that interest them (p. 491).

There are two things that jar in an otherwise accomplished study. One is the decision largely to ignore Edinburgh and Glasgow, because Scotland’s urban system was closely integrated and the two largest cities were vital in providing capital and services such as education and law. In contrast, the authors cover urban–rural interaction rather well. There are tables and statistics, but the treatment is deliberately qualitative. The analysis of the chosen fields is exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting, based on a prodigious amount of scholarship) and the book could have been shorter without loss. It is, nevertheless, clearly written, nicely produced, copiously illustrated and positively good value, in paperback at least, making it accessible to interested local historians (for whom the thorough

index will prove invaluable); it will engage them and perhaps also planners and those in heritage, as well as historians.

The other oddity is the limited social perspective. This is a history from above, where the authors privilege the 'urban gentry': professionals and the better-off craftsmen and tradesmen who had the wealth and political clout to make a difference. Except in chapter 7, much of urban society consequently gets relatively short shrift, as do issues with which civic authorities grappled (and which blighted 'improvement'), such as poor relief, disorder and public health. This is deliberate, for one underlying aim of the book is to correct an overly pessimistic view of deprivation, corruption and filth; the sub-text seems to be that Scottish towns were more than just a backward version of English ones, waiting to catch up. A precise template for comparison might have helped here. Despite the context provided in chapter 1 about types of town, spatial differences within them, and how much 'improved', the book can be vague about what was distinctive and what common about the urban experiences of the component parts of Britain and Ireland (there is a general awareness of European studies, but few comparisons with the Continent). Of course, most of the sources used deal best with the middling and upper ranks of men and, to a much lesser extent, with women of these classes. For example, commercial directories and other types of listing allow for the reconstruction of the supply of goods and services (and an idea of the changing occupational structure) while inventories of possessions auctioned or left after death reveal the ownership of important new consumer goods. Yet, even within these constraints and the authors' remit, among professionals, lawyers and medical practitioners, for example, get less attention than educators and architects. The treatment of culture too leans towards elites: books, periodicals, assemblies, reading rooms and libraries. Finally, it remains unclear what exactly constituted an urban 'community': might it not be better to think of (and explicate) many communities? The reactions, receptions, revisions and refutations of ideas and practices of change among a wide range of social groups and institutions are surely vital to understanding the texture of life in Scotland's towns during 'the Age of Enlightenment'.

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Paul Laxton and Richard Rodger, *Insanitary City: Henry Littlejohn and the Condition of Edinburgh*. Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing, 2014. xvi + 480pp. 87 plates. 7 tables. Bibliography. £25.00 hbk.
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In 1862, Henry Littlejohn was appointed to the newly created position of medical officer of health (MOH) for Edinburgh. Three years later, he published his methodological and statistically rigorous *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Edinburgh*, which offered a comprehensive picture of the city's sanitary problems and a vision for improvement. To make the report more accessible to scholars, Laxton and Rodger present a fine-grained interpretative commentary of Littlejohn's 'extraordinary nineteenth-century account' (p. xv) combined with a facsimile of the original report. The result is not only a meticulous examination of the context of Littlejohn's report and the Edinburgh he described, but also a