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MICHAEL HUNTER, *Boyle: Between God and Science*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009. Pp. xiii + 366. ISBN 978-0-300-12381-4. £25.00 (hardback).
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The seventeenth-century life of Robert Boyle is a mirror of some of the great themes of his age. Seventh son, gentleman, wealthy landowner, Etonian, visitor to the Continent, Protestant-educated, multilinguist, moralist, alchemical adept, forerunner of modern chemistry, champion of experimental philosophy, popularizer of the air-pump, promoter of natural philosophy, early Fellow of the Royal Society, formulator of what came to be called ‘Boyle’s law’, prolific author, citizen of the Republic of Letters, a director of the East India Company, principled lifelong celibate, medical reformer and practitioner, hypochondriac, man of tender conscience, man of charity, pious believer, Bible reader, lay theologian, apologist for reasonable Christianity, high priest of nature, advocate of natural theology, founder of the eponymous lectureship in defence of the faith, backer of foreign Bible translations, supporter of overseas missions and governor of the Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England – Boyle was all of these things and more. In *Boyle: Between God and Science*, Michael Hunter weaves together this rich tapestry of a full life into a balanced, holistic, compelling, readable and – above all – authoritative biography. It is also notable as the first full-length biography of Boyle in forty years, the last being R.E.W. Maddison’s *The Life of the Honourable Robert Boyle*, F. R. S. (1969) – a work that, though useful, cannot be called comprehensive.

Without doubt the leading expert on Boyle today (and probably at any time), Professor Hunter has already made lasting contributions to Boyle scholarship in studies of Boyle’s life, in the Robert Boyle Project and in taking the lead in editing Boyle’s writings. This biography is in part a distillation of this massive body of primary sources and the decades of research Hunter has devoted to Boyle. As such, the biography has a strong intertextual relationship with this other published material, allowing it the luxury of greater concision and focus than otherwise would have been possible. This book therefore forms part of a much larger project. It is worth reflecting on how these efforts have changed our view of Boyle. As Hunter himself reminds us, Boyle became moderately famous in his own lifetime. So much was he sought after in London that he was eventually forced to post visiting hours on his door. Despite this fame in the seventeenth century, his status as an icon of British science was eclipsed in the eighteenth century by Isaac Newton. Hunter’s efforts through his research, the Boyle Project and now this worthy biography have allowed Boyle to come out from under the shadow of Newton.

The volume’s fifteen chapters provide a linear narrative that takes the reader through Boyle’s life in a chronological progression. This is true to the book’s aims, which are ‘to present a narrative of Boyle’s life from cradle to grave, at the same time doing justice to the leading themes in his personal and intellectual development on the basis of the profuse materials that have become available in recent years’ (p. xi). Robust enough intellectually to satisfy the scholar, this biography is also relatively free of jargon and certainly accessible and lively enough to please the non-specialist. The readability of Hunter’s narrative is facilitated in part by a text that is largely unencumbered with historiography, which is treated instead in a useful bibliographic essay. Also helpful is the ‘Table of Boyle’s whereabouts, 1627–1691’. The endnotes furnish sufficient detail

without being excessive and the index is at once generous and precise. Forty-six plates of mostly period engravings add an important visual dynamic to the book.

The author's balance and diplomacy are a model for other biographers of men and women of science. Hunter avoids the anachronistic pitfalls of rational reconstructionism and does not present the reader with what Boyle was not: a modern scientist. Instead, we encounter a man who was both a serious alchemist and an espouser of the experimental method. Hunter's characterization of *The Sceptical Chymist* (1661) is typical of his balanced approach. As he puts it, 'This work has often been acclaimed as a turning point in the evolution of modern chemistry, a crushing blow to traditional alchemy'. Yet

Boyle had no quarrel with those who aspired to the higher mysteries of alchemy. Rather, his book was targeted at distillers, refiners and others, who were so preoccupied by hands-on processes that they lack an interest in theory, and also at the authors of chemical textbooks who combined a similar preoccupation with practical preparations with a reliance on Paracelsian principles (p. 119).

Hunter's approach differs radically from that of those self-appointed custodians of Boyle's legacy who in the eighteenth century destroyed some of Boyle's alchemical correspondence out of concern for his posthumous reputation. Although his task was rendered more difficult by this act of intellectual vandalism, Hunter has avoided such myopia and presented us with all of Boyle. And as Hunter shows, Boyle was much more than a natural philosopher.

Boyle's contributions to the success of modern chemistry and the experimental method are well known and are part of the fame that never completely disappeared even in the eighteenth century. Thanks to the work of Hunter, Lawrence Principe and others, we have also come to know Boyle as an alchemical adept. But Boyle's religious life, too, was central to his being. Hunter presents us with a man whose strong piety led him to utter the name of God only with a great deal of reverence. In a measured way Hunter comments on Boyle's occasional anxieties about religion but also provides a great deal of evidence about Boyle's passionate religious faith and his many efforts in defence of Christianity. Boyle also contributed to the development of natural theological apologetics, perhaps most notably through the founding of the Boyle Lectures (refounded in 2004 and thus a continuing legacy).

In his concluding chapter, Hunter mentions the tension between different characterizations of Boyle's intellectual achievement. On the one hand, 'However strong his own religious impulse to science may have been, his successors found it easy to adopt his methodological prescriptions and his mechanistic worldview in conjunction with only a vestigial form of his passionate theism' (p. 254). Yet for Boyle's own contemporaries, his 'religion was equally, if not more, crucial' (p. 255). Which is the authentic understanding of Boyle? Is there in Boyle's scientific method a secular impulse that runs away from his religious sensibilities? Or is it more reasonable to view the later interpretations of Boyle as shaped largely by intellectual developments that occurred after his death? Hunter's new biography supplies the answer: 'For Boyle science and theology were truly complementary' (p. 254), thus justifying the title of the book. By embracing all of what Boyle was and aspired to be, we see a figure who was able to integrate piety and theology with the practice of natural philosophy in a productive way that has left its lasting stamp on modern science. Hunter has shown us a man who – more than any other of his age – can be called the quintessential Christian virtuoso.

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