

The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment 1740-1820

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Charles McKean

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This formidable and scholarly volume, a major contribution to urban, social and cultural history, is first and foremost a tribute to one of its co-authors, Charles McKean, the distinguished architectural historian, who sadly died when the book was being written. He spent much of his professional career researching, documenting and promoting the history of Scottish architecture the length and breadth of the country and embracing many of the communities which feature in the present study. While the bulk of the book has been written or re-cast by Bob Harris, an established and thoughtful authority on the period, it clearly owes a great deal to McKean's input and the work of several research assistants and archival projects both they and Professor Chris Whatley of the University of Dundee promoted and managed over a ten-year period. The result is a book which draws on extensive research in local and regional sources, many of which have never been systematically investigated or deployed in reconstructing the histories of the communities concerned.

Most books about urbanisation in Britain during this period confine themselves to English towns with the occasional reference to Welsh ones.

This is possibly explained by laziness or disinterest, rather than a deficit of suitable candidates for inclusion – or indeed the sources for their histories or the comparisons which can be made with those in England, Wales and Ireland (indeed with colonial towns, as is suggested here). While there were countless civic histories produced in the 19th and early 20th centuries (including some sound studies of the major cities), urban history as a serious concern of historians in Scotland really only dates back to A. J. Youngson's now famous study of Edinburgh first published in 1966.⁽¹⁾ Youngson brought to the *Making of Classical Edinburgh* many of the concerns of the new urban history allied to then rather novel inter-disciplinary approaches, drawing on the work of architectural historians and the emerging conservation movement. Youngson's work provided a vital propaganda weapon in the fight to save some parts of classical Edinburgh that might well have succumbed to development or urban renewal, which also threatened Bath and Dublin around the same time. Fortunately in the case of Edinburgh much of the celebrated architectural heritage in Old and New Towns survived, the importance of which was ultimately and rightly recognised by UNESCO World Heritage status.

But Edinburgh, then as now, was not Scotland, which even by the time of the Union was still a profoundly

rural society. Compared to England and many countries in Europe, Scottish urbanisation was relatively limited. Indeed the historical geographer, Iain Whyte, has described Scotland, even in the 18th century, as a country of small towns. As it happens (and beyond the main cities which have been pretty thoroughly covered lately) probably the best recent history is Paula Martin's study of Cupar, which she shows to be a classic example of the small(ish) Scottish town in the Age of Improvement.[\(2\)](#)

Quite why urban growth was so limited is difficult to determine given the enthusiastic establishment of burghs in the medieval and early modern periods by monarchy, church and nobility, though economic development from a low base (by Continental standards) was intermittently disrupted by conflict, competition from England, and population growth checked by European-wide agricultural and demographic crises. Certainly by the early decades of the 18th century many of the ancient Scottish burghs, as Harris and McKean show, were emerging from a period of stagnation resulting from a combination of civil and religious strife, loss of trading opportunities caused by the continental wars, the financial and trading disaster of the Darien Scheme, the 'Ill Years' of harvest failures in the 1690s, tariff battles with England, imposition of English taxes and the general failure of the Union to deliver immediate benefits.

Kirkcudbright, in Galloway, one of the towns featured in a later case study here, was described in the early 1720s by Daniel Defoe as 'a pleasant situation, and yet nothing pleasant to be seen ... a harbour without ships, a port without trade, a people without business ... they have a gold-mine on their doorstep, and will not use it'. Not so long after Defoe's tour of Scotland and thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit set going by merchants, and the enthusiasm of lairds for agricultural improvement and proto-industries this was soon set to change, as it was in many other parts of Scotland.

So the big questions for historians are how and why most Scottish towns grew so rapidly in this period, how they became much more important points of interaction and exchange, playing central roles in the movement of goods, capital and services and also of people, ideas and culture. The authors set out to explain how the renewal and development of many towns was a function of 'improvement', which they see as a vital part of Scottish Enlightened mentalities, as were the agricultural, industrial and scientific and cultural revolutions.

Two regions are the focus of particular attention, Perthshire and Angus in the east and Ayrshire in the west, both areas which experienced rapid urbanisation promoted by a combination of industrialisation, mainly textiles (and minerals in Ayrshire), and trade. Other towns also feature as case studies of urban growth and life, the choices being made on the availability of either archival evidence or the physical footprint of improvement and surviving architectural heritage of the period. So the two main cohorts for study are joined at various points in the discourse by places as geographically disparate as Inverness and Peterhead in the north, Haddington, the key market centre in agriculturally advanced East Lothian, Hawick in the Borders, and Dumfries and Kirkcudbright in the south-west. I suppose there are many readers familiar with the territory, natives and visitors alike, who will say 'Why didn't they included such and such a place?', or 'They've forgotten about so and so?'. These might well be good examples of 'improvement towns', but taking account of what can reasonably be covered in a multi-themed study, this is nevertheless a comprehensive survey of the Scottish urban scene.

In setting the context there is a useful comparative review of the scale and development of Scottish towns. Given gaps in the record there's inevitably some inconsistency in the data, though not necessarily of demographic data, since the private Webster-Wallace census of the mid-1750s and the returns to the first Statistical Account of the 1790s have to some extent compensated for the many defects in pre-19th century Scottish vital registers and other nominal or statistical lists. A great deal of painstaking research has produced valuable new evidence about the growth (and in a few cases, the shrinkage) of urban populations, occupational profiles and diversity and social hierarchies (derived from militia returns, burgess admissions and assessed tax returns, where these exist). Commercial directories confirm the rapid growth of crafts and luxury trades servicing professionals and other local and rural elites in the neighbourhood. Indeed, apart from Edinburgh, a select group of towns in this study, including Dumfries, Ayr, Perth and Inverness, could by the end of the 18th century claim sound genteel credentials.

As the authors indicate, Scottish towns do not really fit the narrative of British urbanisation both in the eyes of English observers at the time and later historians. Different in form, they invariably had a linear layout with a principal or high street widening out into a market, lacking castle or defences, apart from stone ports (or gates) where tolls were collected. Townsfolk often lived in 'high rise' tenements above merchants' booths, European style, hence the high densities. English visitors were struck by the smells and filth and even after the cleaning up that was part of the new civic order, the reputation stuck. So too did the original footprint of the plots and 'back lands', still seen behind the main streets in many towns. Public buildings were few, the kirk, tollbooth, mercat cross and school, sometimes in poor repair.

While some of the old was retained or incorporated in new build much disappeared in the widespread 'renewal and refashioning' that constitute the heart of the book. This sets out to describe and analyse urban 'improvement' in terms of change to the built environment and the footprints of the towns. The rebuilding of urban Scotland involved sweeping away the irregular appearance of street layouts and buildings, replacing them with stone and slated structures built to regular plans. Town extensions, essentially small scale versions of the Edinburgh New Town, were invariably on a grid plan, with symmetrically designed buildings showing simple classical ornament. Inventories of personal estates drawn on here indicate a parallel growth of luxury trades servicing the needs of the new urban elite, local gentry and prosperous farmers from the hinterland. There was also a remarkable growth everywhere of social and cultural institutions such as inns, assembly rooms, coffee houses and for intellectual enlightenment, reading rooms and libraries.

With increasing wealth and the accumulation of improved dwellings and goods to match, protection of property (and person) was a growing concern and met everywhere with new measures to control civic order. As in England crime was on the rise and the period saw the establishment of more formal policing (in the widest sense, and embracing vagrancy, paving, moral order generally). Policing also had a role in public health and the relief of the poor, both issues accompanying the rapid urbanisation in many of the towns featured in this study.

My own native place, Lanark, gets a few mentions though it was not included in those chosen for detailed investigation. An ancient inland burgh in upper Clydesdale, it was pretty moribund in the early 1700s but grew significantly after mid-century due to its status as county town and regional market, and unusually, as an inland resort attracting visitors to the falls of Clyde, the most dramatic in Britain. It also benefited from a range of crafts and ultimately the building of the New Lanark cotton mills, which became an icon of reform under its founder, David Dale and his successor, Robert Owen. Thus Old Lanark acquired an improved street-scape, many new dwellings and public buildings which included the New Inn and an assembly room in which gentry and could meet and social activities take place. The population more than doubled before 1820. I mention this because it confirms a central tenet of this book, the enormously rapid change in the period triggered by agricultural and industrial revolutions. These are unfashionable labels maybe but certainly very appropriate in Scotland, with its later start than England and rapidity of development, especially in industry. Moreover *The Scottish Town* provides an invaluable template for the study of other communities, for one of the main failures of some urban studies is their localism and lack of context within a

comparative framework of the kind constructed here.

We might just note that *The Scottish Town* appears not long after a rather different treatment of the same subject from the perspective of Scottish urban history in art.⁽³⁾ The outcome of another long-term project, it displays a stunning visual record of over 150 contemporary images of Scotland's towns and townspeople before photography. In addition to detailed assessments of over 100 towns it also includes chapters reviewing the urban scene, changing townscapes, and depicting the town in art. Since many of the changes illustrated occurred in the Enlightenment era it serves as a useful companion to Harris and McKean's study.

McKean established a reputation as an outstanding scholar and an enormously successful promoter of his subject through his numerous publications and campaigning for the preservation and care of the built heritage. Thanks to the obviously herculean efforts of Bob Harris and his assistants this volume represents a magnificent tribute not only to their own efforts but to Charles McKean as an individual enthusiast – and the remarkable legacy of urban change in the past which so motivated him.

Notes

The author does not wish to make any comments about this review.

1. *The Making of Classical Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1966, and subsequent eds.).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Cupar. The History of a Small Scottish Town* (Edinburgh, 2006).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. E. Patricia Dennison, Stuart Eydmann, Annie Lyell, Michael Lynch and Simon Stronach, *Painting the Town. Scottish Urban History in Art* (Edinburgh, 2013).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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