

Sunday 18 August 2019

Murray Pittock Examines the Scottish Enlightenment

At the Edinburgh International Book Festival

“I hesitate to suggest that intellectual curiosity is some kind of ethno-culturally essentially Scottish thing but there are circumstances in Scotland which do support it,” said Murray Pittock, speaking today at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, in conversation with teaching fellow John Gordon.

The cultural historian drew parallels between Edinburgh during the Enlightenment and smart cities of today, such as Dublin and Palo Alto on the west coast of America. Pittock claimed both cases were linked by a new age in data, analogue or digital. His book, *Enlightenment in a Smart City*, examines Edinburgh in the 17th and 18th centuries, a time he calls the “first age of analogue data collection.”

One of the key factors of the time, Pittock argued, was a new model of library; “[There was] the development of the first subscription library service in the anglophone world... which opened reading to a whole range of people including women. It changes the library from Blockbuster to Netflix. It gives you a subscription model which is universally accessible to people who can be sufficiently connected to it insofar as you could in the transport of the era.”

During the time period covered in the book, Scotland made an unsuccessful attempt to create a colony in Panama, causing a financial crisis which led to the union with England. However, Pittock warned against overemphasising the significance of that event.

“People lost an absolute packet of money, obviously. A lot of people were impacted by the Darien scheme. It’s important to notice that although we want to crystallise it as something which made Scotland completely different forever - it’s some kind of critical, disastrous mistake which Scotland never recover[ed from], it was a financial crisis, there were 3000 subscribers. But if you look at the tax returns in Edinburgh at the period, it’s difficult to actually spot the Darien scheme in it. And it’s a financial crisis. We’ve had financial crises and they do have an impact but they don’t tend to be incorporated into the historiography in a way that makes them kind of permanent.

Charlotte Square Gardens, Edinburgh

10 - 26 August 2019

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“So I think we should be wary of doing that with Darien as well. The big agricultural crisis in England in the 1870s had a big impact, but it wasn’t the end. And nor is Darien.”