

**THE BOOK
OF THE
OLD EDINBURGH
CLUB**

The Journal for
Edinburgh History



Iain Gordon Brown, 'Book Review',
Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, New Series, 10 (2014), pp. 165–167

~~~~~

This article is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club**, **The Journal for Edinburgh History** ISSN 2634-2618

Content © The Old Edinburgh Club and contributors. All rights reserved.

For information about The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (BOEC), including contents of previous issues and indexes, see <https://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/boec>.

**This article is made available for your personal research and private study only.**

For any further uses of BOEC material, please contact the Editor, The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, at [editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk](mailto:editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk). The Club has a Take-Down Policy covering potential rights infringements. Please see <http://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/oec-take-down-policy>.



*Digitised by the Centre for Research  
Collections, Edinburgh University  
Library from the copy in the Library  
Collection*



## Book Review

Vicky Coltman and Stephen Lloyd (eds), **Henry Raeburn. Context, Reception and Reputation.** *Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, pp. xix + 388, illus. Paperback, £25, 978 0 7486 5484 0.*

By sheer coincidence, I opened this book for review on what I found was precisely the 190th anniversary of Sir Henry Raeburn's death. That date is one of the many 'facts' that one can learn from the volume. However it is not a work which those seeking information would be likely to consult in the first instance in order to answer many probable questions on the life and career of an artist who, more than anyone else, captured the images of the leading personalities of the Golden Age of Edinburgh. This is not a biography. Neither is it a sustained exercise in criticism, nor yet is it one much imbued by 'connoisseurship'. There is no chronological framework underpinning and uniting the various essays and there is much overlap and repetition between individual contributions.

What this book sets out to do is to discuss certain aspects, but certain aspects only, of Raeburn, 'the "in-house" portrait painter to members of the Scottish Enlightenment' as the editors epitomise the artist: how he was received and criticised in his own day – and more particularly after his death – and how he fitted into the art-world of his own day. His reputation is examined over the course of the best part of two centuries, and we are invited to study in some depth the ebbing and flowing tides of taste for and against the artist. This last is not just an important aim but an intriguing one; several of the essays tell us much about the market for Raeburn and how he was collected at different times, notably in the age of 'Duveen Taste', and in America, between the 1890s and the 1930s.

The editors declare that they aimed to produce 'a more robust, critical volume' (more than what?) and to look beyond what is normally understood by 'art history' to delve into the realms of cultural, social, political and economic history and even into that of leisure and taste. We miss almost entirely the approach to an understanding of the artist that is derived from the exercise of connoisseurship, a discipline practised so notably by Duncan Thomson in his admirable Raeburn exhibition catalogue of 1997.

It is odd that Dr Thomson is not among the authors gathered together in this book. But Stephen Lloyd's early and often repeated rehearsal of the Raeburn-Danloux controversy over the attribution of 'the Skating Minister' perhaps meant that Thomson, as Raeburn's advocate against the claims made by Lloyd – very probably correctly – for Henri-Pierre Danloux, was *persona non grata* in this revisionist book. It is also a pity that the contributors do not include Dr David Mackie who is completing a vast *catalogue raisonné* of Raeburn's *oeuvre*, an enterprise here rather strangely attributed to the anonymous Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art rather than to the energy of a single scholar.

Instead of work by these two most distinguished Raeburn authorities we have essays by some contributors on topics which seem only tangentially related to Raeburn studies, and which in certain cases seem irrelevant to the subject, even in a loosely structured book such as this. Though Helen Smailes's contribution, 'Scotland's Canova and Immortal Raeburn', is (as one would expect) an excellent piece of research and writing on Thomas Campbell's putative monument to Raeburn – which might have enriched Edinburgh's public sculpture – the essay in fact contains comparatively little on Raeburn himself. But Smailes makes good use (as do other writers in the collection, notably Lloyd and Coltman in their own essays) of the remarkable resource that is the Innes of Stow Muniments in the National Records of Scotland: one of the really significant Scottish archival 'discoveries' of recent times. Based on these important papers, and predicated upon the relationship between Henry Raeburn and his patron Gilbert Innes, Stephen Lloyd and others write (but repetitively) much that is revealing about Raeburn's unfortunate financial ventures as merchant, ship-owner and subsequent bankrupt. Godfrey Evans's well-researched and -written essay on the 10th Duke of Hamilton's unpatriotic taste for Jacques-Louis David and Napoleon rather than for Raeburn and that painter's portrayal of the Duke himself seems not entirely comfortable in this particular volume. Less comfortable still is Sarah Symmons ('Raeburn and Goya') who, though making the interesting point that Raeburn was rather *à la mode* when painting female fashion (Mrs James Gregory appears almost

as a fine ‘citizeness’ of the French Revolution – something of a shock when we think of Raeburn’s Scotland as a country in arms to meet the threat of French invasion), strays rather far from her subject to Whistler and even to Augustus John. This after we have been shown how Robert Dundas, Lord Arniston, is really Pope Innocent X, by Velazquez, disguised in Court of Session robes; and that Robert Ferguson of Raith is actually the Infante Don Fernando!

Entirely uncomfortable in this volume is the essay by Philippe Bordes on the critique of the modern French school, which gives the appearance of having been dragged in to give the book a European dimension. Olivier Meslay, on Raeburn and France, earns his place here more justly, even if his essay is very much a list of acquisitions and provenances. David Alexander’s catalogue of late mezzotints, women sitters being so honoured rather late in the day as they had not been in the artist’s lifetime, is unquestionably authoritative; but in its catalogue form it sits uneasily with the rest of the book – much more so than does Stana Nenadic’s appealing essay, on Raeburn and the Print Culture of Edinburgh in the artist’s own time, which is also broadly on the theme of reproductive engravings and the society, and the classes within it, that valued them.

The essay by Robyn Asleson, one of the best by far in the book, shows that Raeburn was much admired in the United States in his lifetime, largely by emigré Scots demonstrating loyalty to their native country and its art. Raeburn, as a ‘flower of transplanted Scottish culture’, played a most interesting, if vicarious, part in the promotion of art-education in the Federal period through the exposure of certain key portraits, one of which the artist had himself presented as token of appreciation of his election to the American Academy of Fine Arts. ‘This standard specimen from your pencil’ (so the Scottish-American painter Alexander Robertson told Raeburn) ‘is destined to form the manner of our artists.’ American artists, too, actually ‘reconstructed’ Raeburn’s palette: we find a fascinating drawing of that reproduced as fig. 9.4.

The story of a late portrait of Dugald Stewart, once in Philadelphia, gives rise to a discussion of the links between Scottish ‘common-sense’ philosophy and painting as exemplified by Raeburn’s art, albeit this topic – much written of, in recent years, by Duncan Macmillan and Nicholas Phillipson – is handled

rather more sceptically (indeed it is almost dismissed) by more than one author in the present volume, most notably by Matthew Craske in his valuable analysis of Allan Cunningham’s ‘Vasarian’ life of Raeburn. Nicholas Tromans further takes Phillipson to task by a brisk correction of the latter’s dismissal of Raeburn’s celebrated Royal Academy diploma piece, ‘Boy and Rabbit’, as ‘cloyingly sentimental’: Tromans shows how Raeburn in fact produced a genre version of his general practice, a ‘fancy picture’ in keeping with contemporary notions of childhood.

Essays here deal, more or less directly, with Raeburn in London. This particular topic is extremely interesting, even if sometimes the writing on it, by various hands and by some more than others, is not in the easiest or most elegant style. Tromans calls Raeburn the Royal Academy’s ‘Member for Scotland’ – which makes him sound like another Duncan McLaren in a different field. But the ‘lonely patrician beyond the competitive field’ is a not wholly comprehensible description of Mr Raeburn of Edinburgh. There are, however, important points to be made: Raeburn’s provision of ‘a retiring modesty contrasted with Lawrence’s excessive corporal [*sic: corporeal?*] projection’ does sum up the Scotsman’s art quite well. Much is made of the ‘sexless’ colours of Raeburn’s palette compared with the sensual ruddiness of Lawrence. In Tromans’s discussion of colour and eroticism it seems that Raeburn’s use of green is to be equated with some form of ‘erotic deficit’. Tell that to smouldering Mrs Scott Moncrieff – discussed, along with other portraits of women young and old, by Jordan Mearns – or beefy Lord Newton! But Tromans also points out that Raeburn showed his portrait of Walter Scott (the picture now at Bowhill) at the Royal Academy in 1810 more for the sake of convenience than anything else. The canvas was in London to be engraved: this practical motive lay rather behind Raeburn’s decision to exhibit it that year than because the sitter was flavour of the month as author of the bestselling *Lady of the Lake*. In fact it got Raeburn into trouble with the Academy: he should not have shown a portrait that had already been engraved.

A point made by various contributors relates to a paradox in Raeburn’s life: that this man so intimately identified with Edinburgh and the representation of its cultural and social leaders should, around 1810, have tried to become a London-based painter; and

that, greatly to Scotland's benefit, he failed to make it as such. Raeburn's reputation in America was enhanced by his remaining in Edinburgh, a decision that allowed Scottish-American admirers to maintain a sentimental link with the old country which in turn boosted Raeburn's transatlantic reputation.

It is ironic that Walter Scott, of all people, should appear to have criticised Raeburn for painting for money. Why else did Scott himself write? One realises from reading several of the essays, especially Craske's, that there is a parallel between Raeburn's undoing in his commercial ventures and Scott's ruin though his involvement in business. Neither man, it seems, was entirely satisfied with the rewards of his art alone.

This is actually a rather confused book. The editors furnish an extensive and detailed list of work on Raeburn that *might* be done in the future but which is *not* addressed in their volume. Why not? Thus the present book seems very much a progress report that collects miscellaneous writings on themes connected with Raeburn – often far too loosely and tenuously connected with him at that – which could not find homes elsewhere. Given that the book originated in a series of conference papers delivered in 2006 and that several other contributions have been 'bolted on' to add value – neither circumstance necessarily making for the best or most cohesive of titles – this volume could still have been better than it actually is. The editors should have exercised tighter control of individual essays to avoid excessive repetition. Self-control might also have been practised. Lloyd drags in his favourite Danloux just too often; and

his Introduction and his own essay cover too much of the same ground on which, as joint editor, he also lets other contributors roam free. Coltman interrupts her own declared purpose of discussing Raeburn's portrait of Lord Hopetoun by a long digression on (other) artists' studios but does not really enlarge our understanding of that part of her essay comprehended by the subtitle: 'The "Knotty" Business of Portrait Painting in London and Edinburgh in the 1810s'. She has an unfinished sentence on page 100, immediately followed by a passage in tortured prose. And 'the judiciary [*sic*] of the Court of Session' is an unfortunate mixing-up of Scottish legal terminology. Tromans is understandably not an expert on Highland dress; but 'red-barred stockings' might possibly have been edited into 'diced hose of military pattern'. As befits a modern, rather self-consciously 'academic' book, there are plenty of 'élite' this-and-thats, 'histories', 'cohorts', 'paradigms', 'groundbreaking' research, a 'verism' here and a 'complementarity' there, 'tropes' a-plenty, 'masculinities', 'gendered anthropomorphism', etc., etc. I wonder if visitors to the Royal Academy's exhibition in 1819 really did gawp at Raeburn's 'The MacNab' and think him 'autochthonous' (p. 97). A fine, sesquipedalian word: but what does it actually mean, and is it used correctly? Oh, for some of Duncan Thomson's descriptions of the quality of light or the handling of paint in the wonderful William Glendonwyn of Parton or the matchless Clerks of Penicuik!

*IAIN GORDON BROWN*