REVIEW


With regard to the Scottish craft guilds of the early modern period, A.M. Allen claims “detailed work on specific crafts has been severely underdeveloped.” However, one cannot assert the same claim having read Allen’s work, *The Locksmith Craft in Early Modern Edinburgh*, which produces not only a thorough examination of the lives of the men involved in the locksmith trade in early modern Edinburgh, but also a deeper illustration of the whole of Edinburgh in the period of corporatism before industrialization. A dense amount of research culminates in an achievement that reveals the world of Edinburgh locksmiths delved far beyond simple locks and keys. Moreover, Allen considers the influence of the Protestant Reformation, the power wielded by the town council over the guilds, the “flight to the suburbs” by Edinburgh Hammermen, and the craft hierarchy in his discussion of the eventual growth and leveling off of the Incorporation of Hammermen in Edinburgh from approximately 1483 until 1750. In turn, readers of Allen’s work enter into the early modern world of the locksmith craft and its selectivity, skills, and services.

Allen demonstrates that even the most skilled men had little guarantee of success as a burgess of the craft; in fact, not unlike other European urban centres, the Edinburgh market dictated whether or not a craftsman could even become a freeman master, as supply and demand weighed against one’s freedom. Allen’s reconstruction of the life of locksmith Edward
Bell is an especially helpful example, as Bell apprenticed for nearly thirteen years before he received the official title of freemen of the Edinburgh Incorporation of Hammermen. However, for men who chose not to apprentice (or perhaps were denied apprenticeships), the road to burgess-ship became somewhat easier if one had a burgess father or father-in-law. Interestingly, men married to a burgess’s daughter were granted a legitimate route into proper and full admittance as a burgess, which Allen inquires as “a burgh-controlled dowry of sorts, to ensure that female children in a patriarchal society were not left uncared for.” This hypothesis is helpful for those who study early modern Scottish women and gender, as perhaps burgesses’ daughters exercised their own (however slight) power in marriage negotiations, knowing their hand offered a lucrative and assured social position for suitors. Greater discussion and consideration of this area is required.

Allen’s work includes a plethora of helpful charts and tables to contextualize his compact discussion. Though Allen’s descriptions of the mechanisms of lock springs and shank, pipe, and stock-lock keys sometimes fails to turn one’s crank, he does manage to draw the reader to appreciate the quality and quantity of locks, and realize that these mechanisms not only protected people and their belongings, but also became “grandiose works of art” themselves. The gorgeously compiled assortment of surviving locks and keys housed in the National Museums of Scotland included in the book easily enhances the work, and helpfully displays the intricacies involved in the various locks and keys.

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