As one of a series of four books covering the medieval to modern period, the editors and contributors to this collection had the daunting task of exploring two hundred years of everyday life in early modern Scotland. In this collection, the ‘everyday’ encompasses everything from vernacular language, urban growth, and country farming, to sensory experiences such as smell and touch, and the experiences of pain and death. The variety of topics addressed is both a strength and a weakness; there is something of interest to a wide range of historians, but the ‘everyday life,’ as defined by the editors, is broad and, because each contributor approaches the everyday differently, the collection can at times seem unfocused. Despite this, all of the contributors address how everyday life may have changed or remained constant from 1600 to 1800, and it is the inclusion of these themes that form a cohesive collection.

The ways in which everyday life changed are as varied as the topics under consideration. For Robert A. Dodgshon and Christopher Whatley, who both focus on work and labour, change could mean the ‘rhythms of everyday life’ as dictated by the seasons, or the more dramatic changes brought forth by new technologies and techniques. The idea of everyday life being transformed, rather than minimally altered, is also present in the chapters by Stana Nenadic, Alastair Durie, and Charles McKean. Following devastating famines in the 1690s, Nenadic writes, Scots had unprecedented access to food and clothing by the end of the
century. Likewise, Durie asserts that the early modern period saw unparalleled developments in transportation technology and, perhaps in both cases, to a person from the 1690s, “the world of the 1790s would have been as different to them as it would have been to their great-grandchildren of the 1890s looking back” (p. 267).

For McKean, the development of Scotland’s urban landscape was not a product of “gradual evolution,” but of a “cultural shift” caused by the Enlightenment. (p. 77) He identifies four themes that directly address the everyday life of Scots, but the most crucial theme “is the influence of the Enlightenment and the impulse of modernity” (p. 52). In a collection of essays about the everyday experience, McKean’s emphasis on the progress toward ‘modernity’ seems out of place and Whiggish, but his analysis of the growth in urban planning across Scotland is an important contribution.

Other chapters focus on reconstructing the lived experiences of early modern people. Christopher Whatley and Joyce Miller examine crime and faith within the larger institutions of the courts and church. Experience is also considered more abstractly; Elizabeth Foyster’s discussion of the sensory experiences of Scots in the countryside and cities is particularly captivating. She quotes a Cheshire gentleman visiting Edinburgh in 1636, who remarked that “the sluttishness and nastiness of this people is such ... their houses, and halls, and kitchens have such a noisome taste, a savour, and that so strong, as it doth offend you so soon as you come within their wall” (p. 220). In addition to first-hand accounts of the sounds and smells of Scotland, Foyster raises important questions about our interpretation of these sensory experiences: what was a bad smell? What was good touch? The answers vary depending on context; as Foyster argues, smells and touch could be both pungent and curative, and smells changed over time as new foods, spices and perfumes were introduced to Scotland. Aromatic smells in the eighteenth century may have been unknown to Scots in the
seventeenth century, while these same perfumes might be noisome to a modern nose.

Deborah A. Symonds and Helen M. Dingwall acknowledge that the standard of living improved between 1600 and 1800, but argue that the lifecycle of birth, marriage, and death, and the experience of illness, disease, and pain, were constants. Symonds reflects that by 1800, “new difficulties” replaced “old horrors,” but that “nothing really changes, it seems” (p. 103). Similarly, Bob Harris identifies significant change in the period as the means of communicating increased dramatically: print culture expanded and new transportation technologies were introduced. Yet older forms of communication still flourished, particularly oral culture and the centrality of the market and the churchyard in spreading information by word of mouth. “For the bulk of the population,” Harris concludes, “the world of communication in 1800 continued to have much in common with that of 1600” (p. 182).

While the parameters of ‘the everyday’ are too loose to be entirely effective, the contributors have a nuanced approach to the major and minor changes and constants in everyday life, identifying the regional differences between country and city, Lowlands and Highlands, seventeenth versus eighteenth century. Although agricultural history, urban history, and the lifecycles of lower and middling-class people have been treated elsewhere, this collection is a valuable addition to a growing historiography of ordinary, everyday life.

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