REVIEW


As is often said, Scotland’s international brand revolves romantically around mountains, lochs, castles, ceilidhs, and kilts. Intimately—and perhaps perversely—connected with all of this imagery is the monumental urban setpiece of Edinburgh, surely one of the great cities: a UNESCO World Heritage Site in two parts, the medieval Old Town and the eighteenth- to twentieth-century New Town. Among many other lucidly elaborated themes, Painting the Town considers this pastoral-urban tension. One painting in this beautifully illustrated and produced book, Alexander Nasmyth’s early, dramatic view of Edinburgh Castle (1780), goes as far as almost to deny the castle’s prominent place in the heart of the city, presenting it as a “Highland” fortress on its volcanic rock, complete with the unfeasibly shimmering Nor’ Loch, which was to be drained in the name of urbanist improvement only a year later. Another half century later, Nasmyth’s Princes Street with the Commencement of the Building of the Royal Institution (1825), celebrates the new Edinburgh, its precise, square-cut urbanity minutely displayed against the summarised romantic backdrop of the Old Town. We see that Edinburgh’s split personality was celebrated and anatomised from an early date.

Painting the Town takes the simple notion of presenting Scotland’s historic townscape through a series of views, maps and plans. But as with estate plans and other self-publicity, what you saw is not always what you got. Artists played with scale, light, colour and topography, even moving mountains to create more—or occasionally less—pleasing compositions. The difficulties of treating the material as a record are well understood and explained by the authors. Hugh Irvine’s Aberdeen view, Castle Gate, (1803), for example, with its restored architecture, seems to be an early
example of the ‘lost’ city image, perhaps recalling a pre-improvement golden age.

With all its rugged mountain scenery and Highland identity, Scotland is nevertheless one of the most urbanised countries in the world. As old and new landowners privatised and actively depopulated the country’s vast landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the towns and cities were expanded to bursting point with new inhabitants: dozens of new towns were also created in the name of improvement. Paul Sandby’s Prospect of Duniquich and Old Castle of Inveraray from the Market Place (c. 1747) records a disappearing urban scene for posterity. The place-type of the clustered castle-town was destroyed at Inveraray, Fochabers and elsewhere in order to put some distance between the new, commercially-focussed landowner and his tenants. Painting the Town clearly charts this shifting identity. Existing, growing towns like Aberdeen, Kilmarnock and Dumfries are carefully presented as models of urban order through a variety of carefully composed paintings.

This is urban history through the mirror of art, graphic in its content and its aspirations. We see towns as they wished to be seen, places of commerce and civility, but we also see their grisly side as theatres of public humiliation, for example, through Paul Sandby’s casual depiction of the execution of the forger, Sergeant John Young (1751). Sandby’s sketches are some of the few visualisations presented with no apparent agenda. At the other end of that scale, the extent of drunkenness and debauchery depicted in William Thomas Reid’s Leith Races (1859) seems scarcely possible: it is surely both a titillation and an admonition about the dangers of urban living at a time when cities were beginning to be problematized. Wilkie’s Pitlessie Fair (1804) had certainly harkened back to an architecture of charming disarray amid social harmony, and even Glasgow Fair (1825) by the cartoonist William Heath seems strangely calm and well-ordered, with the neat and compact town sitting serenely separate but connected to the main subject of the painting. Like many of the book’s themes, artistic and literary representations of fairs in Scotland suggest a rich subject in itself.
We see, of course, what the artist wants us to see. Many of the scenes are formulaic enough, populated with obligatory blind beggars and kilted soldiers, but they can also be biting lampoons. Henry Harwood’s *The Executive* (1821) contrasts the well-built city of Dundee and the new Trades Hall with its governing body, an intimidating in-crowd of solid, well-fed burghers who occupy the foreground of the painting in the casually intimidating stance of a street gang.

This is a superb book that will become a research standard for many years to come for its architectural, artistic, historical, and social context. It is particularly strong on the aspirations for urban space and its use in the growing towns. *Painting the Town* is a rare achievement: analytical, informative and thought-provoking, but also hugely entertaining.

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