REVIEW


On 10th October 1802, Hugh Miller was born in Cromarty, a small but prosperous town in northern Scotland. His life spanned half a century of enormous change; socially, religiously and scientifically. The Victorian era saw a growth in industry and technology stemming from a burgeoning interest in science. As a result of the development of scientific theory, particularly in human evolution, science was perceived to be in direct conflict with religion. Despite the perception of conflict, it was both religion and science which shaped the social movements and the preoccupation with ‘progress’ which defined the age. Although this era has been well documented, Michael Taylor gives it a distinctly human spin by presenting it through the eyes of Hugh Miller, ‘stonemason, geologist, and writer’.

Miller was in no way a passive member of this society, being described by his contemporaries as a social commentator. Using his position as editor of The Witness, Miller presented his opinions on matters as diverse as the Disruption in the Church of Scotland and the displacement of the rural working classes owing to commercialisation of estates. Taylor maintains that Miller’s particular interest in the treatment of the rural poor, especially around the issue of the Clearances, stemmed from Miller’s position as a stonemason. Despite his strong convictions regarding social justice, Miller was a moderate. His decidedly temperate stance resulted from his distaste for ‘political radicalism’.

However, Miller was outspoken on division of the Church of Scotland. Through The Witness, Miller reported on the ambitions of the Evangelicals to separate the church from the state, which resulted in the schism of 1843. Although a Free Church supporter, Miller was not a ‘slavish propagandist for a party line’. According to Taylor, Miller’s ‘mentality was mainstream, apparently reflecting the contemporary perspective of thinking people
rather than bigots’. Indeed, Taylor maintains Miller showed greater passion not through debating social movements, but when he was alone, splitting open rocks for fossils, in quiet introspection.

While Miller held many jobs, such as editor of The Witness, monumental stonemason, and bank employee, he always pursued geology. Taylor uses Miller’s published works and his wife’s memoirs, to express how Miller ‘was intensely happy’ when ‘breaking open his specimens or thinking over them at his work’. ‘Miller’s finds...were indeed a substantial contribution to the diversity and geological distribution...of [the] Devonian age’. His fossils attained ‘the status of specimens...crucially enabling scientists to establish the language of their discussion’. It was during this time with his eyes on the ground examining fossilized vegetation and crustaceans that Miller considered the heated evolution debate of the Victorian era. Taylor carefully sidesteps the question of Miller being a creationist or evolutionist by stating that Miller considered both religion and science in categorizing his fossils. Miller was able to largely reconcile his scientific discoveries with his religion due to new evolutionary theories which were being presented. One of these stated that the Earth’s history was ‘periodically marked by massive catastrophes, each wiped out all life, and was followed by a new divine creation’. Miller concluded that his fossils were from a separate, preadamite creation. His engagement with such issues as the evolutionary conflict, the schism in the Church, and the analysis of the developing class system made him an intrinsic part of some of the most important debates of Victorian Scotland.

His ability to apply himself to different social issues and interests made him a model Victorian. Miller’s contemporaries regarded him as self-taught and resourceful: a Renaissance man. His contributions to the development of geology, as well as his participation in the Disruption, earned him a place in history. However, the Miller of history is often romanticized, a notion which Taylor fights to dispel. For example, fellow geologist Archibald Geikie stated that Miller’s celebrity had become so widespread, that his name was so easily recognized that it required ‘no further description or explanation’. Miller had become a Scottish icon and was seen as embodying the very characteristics of Scotland. According to Miller’s wife, ‘he loved to feel every inch a Scotsman...the scenery, the traditions, the very soil of his country were inexpressibly dear to him...and immense part of himself’. Despite his best efforts, Taylor reverts to the ‘Great
Man’ theory in his book. He stated, ‘Miller can certainly appear an odd hero’ but was a man ‘whom the Victorians hugely respected for his consistency, integrity and independence’. It is not that Miller’s life does not deserve praise, but Taylor neglects to offer any real criticism of Miller, or present any critics among Miller’s peers.

Taylor deftly organizes his immense quantity of research and Miller’s complex life into clear and manageable sections. The twenty short chapters are organized thematically and with an effort to remain chronological. Taylor intersperses his research with frequent ‘word-pictures’. These are direct excerpts from Miller’s own work as well as writings from those closest to him, such as his wife and his fellow geologists. These passages give further insight into his introverted personality. Taylor also provides two sections of glossy photographs and illustrations of Miller, his family, his fossils, his hometown of Cromarty, and of the contemporaries who collaborated on his work.

The pictures, excerpts and thematic chapters create a comprehensive and enjoyable volume. Not only does Taylor’s book offer insight into Miller’s life and work, but it also acts as a mirror to the era in which Miller lived. By examining the nineteenth century through Miller’s eyes, it is easy to trace the impact of the ‘era of progress’ on its people.

Monica Finlay,
University of Guelph