Jenni Calder’s book about Edinburgh defies categorization. It has elements of historical analysis, a guide to the city’s architecture and natural environment, glimmers of family history, with the publisher labelling it ‘travel writing’. However, none of these categories can do it sufficient justice, even though her treatment of Edinburgh encompasses all of them. It can more accurately be described as a deeply personal account of how Edinburgh has shaped her writer’s consciousness. She writes, moreover, very much with the expertise of a distinguished historian and literary critic, as well as poet and novelist in her own right. She explains her aims in the ‘Prologue’ in a manner reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson: ‘The most rewarding journeys are often those that don’t stick to a plan, that follow serendipitous associations and are open to the unexpected’. Her exploration of Edinburgh’s history she describes as follows: ‘you turn corners of the past which break away from conventional chronology and suggest unexpected connections’ (p11). Some of the ‘unexpected connections’ come from the modern Edinburgh poets she quotes, such as Norman MacCaig, Stewart Conn and Ron Butlin.

Mario Relich is former Secretary of the Poetry Association of Scotland and a member of the executive committee of Scottish PEN. He is a regular contributor to Scottish Affairs.
Her richly imagined vision of the capital city devotes much space to writers like Walter Scott, Henry Cockburn, Hugh Miller, and Chiang Yee, Chinese author of *The Silent Traveller in Edinburgh* (1948), as well as Stevenson himself. As she points out about all these writers, but particularly Scott and Stevenson: ‘For anyone acquainted with their books, it is impossible not to absorb the city through their eyes’ (p27).

Regarding Walter Scott, her discussion of the Old Tolbooth, as described in *The Heart of Midlothian*, and regarded at the time of the Porteous Riots as the ‘heart’ of Edinburgh, is particularly illuminating. The Tolbooth was demolished at the very time Scott wrote his novel and he secured parts of it for Abbotsford. Calder quotes Scott on his acquisition of the Tolbooth relics:

... it is not without interest, that we see the gateway through which so much of the stormy politics of a rude age, and the vice and misery of later times, had found their passage, now occupied in the service of rural economy. (p15)

She finds herself agreeing with Scott that ‘Midlothian’s heart is unequivocally associated with misery and violence’ and observes that not long from before Scott’s time from a dwelling ‘high up in an Old Town tenement, built high because of the lack of space, you might find yourself eyeball to eyeball with a dead head. The intimacy is held in the stone’ (p19).

Scott’s novel opens with a lawyer and other Edinburgh worthies discussing the significance of the Tolbooth just as it is about to be demolished. It is an opening vividly described by Calder, concluding that ‘the heart of Midlothian contains all of human life, the engine, perhaps, of the city’s, as well as the novel’s pulse’. She also suggests that perhaps ‘the sad, hard, wicked, poor, strong and high heart is an emblem of much of Scotland’s past’ (p20), and therefore devotes much space to gripping, yet impartial and empathetic, accounts of the Covenanters insurgencies and Jacobite insurrections.

Nor does she neglect to discuss poverty in Edinburgh, such as described by Isabela Bird, better known as a travel-writer, in *Notes on Old Edinburgh* (1868), a damning report on slum conditions in the Cowgate, and remarks drily that her words ‘have a 21st-century relevance’ (p65). She also mentions that Muriel Spark reflects on poverty and ‘social nervousness’ in *Curriculum Vitae*, describing Edinburgh in the 1930s, and her awareness as a child of ‘dole queues, ill-nourished barefoot children contrasting with equally evident privilege’ (p66). Ian Rankin and Quentin Jardine are commended as more recent chroniclers of the darker side of Edinburgh.

Her many references to Stevenson includes a vivid discussion of his unfinished novel *St. Ives*. As she puts it, the 1898 novel ‘goes back to the
year 1813, when Britain was at war with Napoleon’ (p39). Its hero, St. Ives, is a French soldier and prisoner-of-war incarcerated in the Castle. Plotting to escape, he tells us that when looking down on the battlements, he sees ‘the long terrace of Princes Street which serves as a promenade to the fashionable people of Edinburgh’, and in a Stevensonian flourish he finds it ‘A singularity’ that this ‘military prison ... should command a view on the chief thoroughfare!’ (p39). He succeeds in escaping, and ‘Stevenson’s text ends with an inebriated walk from Cramond to Edinburgh after a night of over-indulgence’, which the hero tells us happened at ‘a hostelry of no very promising appearance’ (p40).

Calder’s interest in St. Ives extends further. She rejected Arthur Quiller-Couch’s 1898 edition of the novel, which adds his own speculative final chapters, and has written her own version based on research ‘by the late R J Storey’ in 1990 which ‘suggested that Stevenson had planned an ending rather different from the one Quiller-Couch supplied’. Her own version ends, as her ‘spoiler alert’ tells us, ‘with St. Ives successfully confronting his evil cousin on the shores of the Forth, and repairing thereafter to the comforts of Queensferry’s Hawes Inn’ (p40). The Hawes Inn, still there in South Queensferry, where she lives now, also turns up, as she reminds us, in Scott’s The Antiquary, where Jonathan Oldbuck, the antiquary of the title, finds it ‘a very decent sort of place’ (p194). She also reminds us that it is mentioned by David Balfour in Stevenson’s Kidnapped, and that the writer ‘was very familiar with Queensferry and the Forth Shore, and often walked out to the Hawes from Edinburgh’ (p195).

The black-and-white photographs are by her late brother Alan Daiches, ‘who began his photographic career in Edinburgh in the 1960s’ (p11), and her daughter Rachel Calder. His photographs of closes and buildings in the Old Town illustrate Calder’s book and were used for a BBC television production of Sydney Goodsir Smith’s long poem Kynd Kittock’s Land, which was ‘aired on 28 February 1964 and repeated the following year’. One photograph shows the Edinburgh poet himself having a smoke and apparently looking quizzically at the photographer from a dark corner in a Rose Street pub. Calder’s critique of the poem tells us that it ‘is textured like the city itself, stony, craggy, dark, two-faced, woven with dreams and memories’ (p210). A detail in close-up of the Flodden Wall, its texture rugged and weather-beaten (p38), reminds us of how often Edinburgh faced the peril of invasion. One of Rachel Calder’s finest photographs, ‘Aqueduct over the River Almond’ (p177), is shot from a dramatically low angle. The photographs mentioned are very well reproduced, but some of the others are too dark, the result undoubtedly of faulty printing.

The printers who flourished in 18th century Edinburgh, however, are treated by Calder as the unsung heroes of the Enlightenment. As she puts it,
‘there’s printer’s ink running down the High Street as well as blood, and the clank and pound of presses as well as the clash of claymores’. She envisages the ghosts of such printers and compositors lurking in the wynds and closes, concluding that – perhaps – ‘we need a counterpart to Fergusson striding down the Canongate and Hume thoughtfully contemplating the congested traffic flow at the top of the Mound to commemorate the trade they both depended on’ (p111). Her chapter on the Enlightenment, in fact, lays as much stress on publishers, and periodicals, as on the great philosophers, historians, writers and scientists. She also mentions the importance of convivial clubs and societies, ‘which were focal points of exchange’ among the likes of David Hume, Adam Smith, and Allan Ramsay the painter, who ‘formed the Select Society in 1754, only one of many clubs where well-lubricated discussions took place’ (p103).

Ramsay also painted a famous portrait of Hume, wearing a splendid red jacket trimmed with gold-coloured lace and facing the viewer squarely, as befitting a bold philosopher. The portrait is in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, but in the book it is wrongly attributed to Henry Raeburn. Interestingly, though, Raeburn did do a portrait of Hume’s nephew, ‘The Honourable David Hume, Baron of Exchequer’, which is in the Signet Library. Calder otherwise writes very well on Raeburn, ‘who painted some of the most notable figures of his time’. She reminds us that in the Portrait Gallery can be found some of Raeburn’s finest portraits, including:

Colonel Alastair Macdonnel of Glengarry festooned in full tartan regalia and anachronistic weaponry, Lord Braxfield staring belligerently, and a self-portrait of Raeburn himself who gazes out of the canvas with a look of thoughtful scepticism. (p163)

About Lord Justice Clerk Braxfield, Calder reminds us that he was no beacon of benign scepticism and toleration but a judge who treated radical agitators harshly, and ‘who had sent Deacon Brodie to the gallows’. Almost like a Braxfield on the side of the angels, or even a Gibbon, she can be caustic when it comes to human cruelty. About the judicial burning of witches on Castlehill, which ‘persisted until the 1670s’ (p49), for example, she has this to say: ‘It must have added another note to the stench of the city’.

While scepticism of one kind or another was at the heart of Scottish Enlightenment thinking, its greatest, or at least most visible, product was the New Town. Like the Old Town, it plays a prominent part in Calder’s book. She also calls it ‘a paean to the Union and the House of Hanover’ (p119); indeed, the politics and history of unionism in Edinburgh are a prominent theme in her book. She also mentions that at the time ‘most of Edinburgh’s more sophisticated townspeople congratulated themselves on their city’s achievement’,

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and that they considered, moreover, that the ‘Old Town may have been picturesque, but spacious dignity was finer, and certainly more comfortable and salubrious’ (p124). But this did not necessarily mean that those ‘with certain attitudes of entitlement’ only could afford to live in it. In a reference to her paternal grandmother, who was the widow of Dr. Salis Daiches, distinguished Edinburgh rabbi, she observes:

... when I think of my grandmother’s modest existence in her high-ceilinged first-floor (the drawing room floor) flat in Heriot Row, the widow of a rabbi, I am reminded that the imposing houses could accommodate different lives. (p125)

Jenni Calder, as she mentions in the context of her family history, is the daughter of David Daiches, literary historian and critic particularly known for the memoir of his Edinburgh childhood growing up in a Jewish household, Two Worlds. Daiches is ‘remembered at the doorstep of the Writers’ Museum, which occupies Lady Stair’s House’, and devoted primarily to Burns, Scott and Stevenson, ‘all writers he advocated and explained at a time when particularly the latter two were overlooked’. The chiselled words from Daiches are to the effect that ‘Bridge-building is my vocation’ (p66). Calder has been a bridge-builder herself, not least when working for many years as education officer and holding other managerial posts at the National Museum of Scotland, and her book certainly pays much attention to Edinburgh as the city of Scott and Stevenson. Essence of Edinburgh, moreover, also explores two worlds, that of the author’s historical imagination about the capital city, where she grew up, and her experience of it as ‘the city in my bloodstream’. She tells us in the ‘Prologue’ that her book is ‘an evocation rather than a history’; indeed, it is very much an insightful evocation of what makes Edinburgh one of the world’s great cities.

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