



Henderson, L. (2020) Ghosts in Enlightenment Scotland by Martha McGill.
Preternature, 9(1), pp. 129-132.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/212419/>

Deposited on: 19 March 2020

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

***Ghosts in Enlightenment Scotland.* McGill, Martha. *Scottish Historical Review Monograph Series.* Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018. 255pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-78327-362-1 £50.00 \$90.00**

The perception of Scotland as a haven of superstition, where myths and outmoded beliefs in such things as witches and fairies held sway for much longer than was seemly, is a powerful stereotype of longstanding. Even today, the long shadow of James MacPherson's *Ossian* (1760), and the legacy of Romanticism, affect comprehensions of Scotland as a peculiarly haunted land; the natural abode of ghosts and spirits.

Various accounts and compendiums of Scottish ghost stories, collected and compiled over the last two centuries, are reasonably accessible but critical analysis of such tales are in short supply. Hence, the arrival of this study is most welcome as there is little by way of sensible discussion on the historical role of ghosts in a Scottish context thus far. In this respect, McGill's work has laid a foundation stone upon which to build, not unlike Jean-Claude Schmitt did for Medieval European ghost beliefs, or Gillian Bennett for twentieth-century memorates (personal belief narratives) of ghostly encounters, though curiously McGill does not make much of these previous important works within her own study. This neglect may, in part, be explained by the timeframe of the book – focussing largely on the period from 1685 to 1832 – between the publication of George Sinclair's *Satan's Invisible World Discovered* and the death of Sir Walter Scott.

The decision to curtail her study within the parameters of Scotland's Enlightenment era has been partly dictated by the availability of sources and commentary on the subject as there was, as others (including myself) have discovered, a rise in interest in the supernatural from the later seventeenth century onwards. But it is an interesting time span for other reasons also, not least for the assumption that the period is associated with the rise of rationalism. That ghosts and other tales of terror should thrive in the so-called 'Age of Enlightenment' might initially seem antithetical but McGill's book contributes to a growing body of evidence that reveals a more nuanced understanding of the supernatural was developing during Scotland's 'long eighteenth century'.

"Ghosts", McGill argues, "never had a fixed identity"; they "inhabited a broader range of imagined worlds". Moreover, ghost narratives are reflective of contemporary concerns about religion, mortality, and identity. Therefore, in order to establish the various ways in which ghosts were understood and utilised, the book draws on a range of fictional and non-fictional sources, including works of philosophy and theology, church and court records, a range of periodicals and printed pamphlets, novels, poems and dramatic plays, as well as traditional ballads and the collecting of folk materials by antiquarians and folklorists.

A particular strength of this book is that it is supremely well organized, laying out a coherent pathway down which the reader is led on a trail of discovery as to the changing nature of ghost beliefs over time. Following some introductory statements on the historiography of ghosts, defining the relevant terminologies, and types of sources consulted, the journey begins, in chapter one, in the Medieval period leading up to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Pre-Reformation ghosts tended to assume corporeal form, i.e. revenant or living corpse, mainly appearing in order to make some moral or theological point, though their precise status was ambiguous and were sometimes equated with demons. Protestant reformers initially struggled with explaining the reality or purpose of ghosts for they had eradicated the theory of Purgatory extolled by Catholicism, of an intermediate state of existence wherein the dead might linger. Yet ghosts could not be denied outright as there was biblical evidence for their existence. James VI's *Daemonologie* (1597) offered a compelling solution, which was to consider all such apparitions and spirits as emanations of the Devil. The demonization of ghosts and apparitions, no doubt reinforced by

the persecuting culture that arose during the time of the witch-hunts, held sway until at least the late seventeenth century when ghosts might also be viewed as indicators of divine providence.

The evangelising qualities of ghosts is picked up in chapter two, surveying the religious culture in which they thrived, especially potent in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as a mechanism for Protestant propagandism against atheism, and ostensibly proving the reality of God, the soul and the afterlife. Changing perceptions of ghosts against the backdrop of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy and scientific advancements forms the basis of chapter three. It is in this chapter that we are, essentially, entering what should be the heart of this book. The supernatural, to the minds of enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, William Robertson, and Francis Hutcheson, was an accepted subject for debate in terms of religion, though ghosts, per se, were generally absent from such intellectual discourse, save, perhaps, for their association with religious enthusiasm. Where ghosts did emerge as a topic of relevance was within the burgeoning interest in medicine, psychology and mental disorders. Ghostly visions could be rationally explained as persons suffering from delusions or melancholy. By century's end ghosts had essentially been transformed from demons in disguise to no more than the products of a diseased mind. The attempts of the sceptics to distance themselves from explanations deriving from the preternatural world, of relegating belief in ghosts as an indicator of "vulgar superstition", might have heralded the death, so to speak, of those spectres already dead. Yet, on the contrary, the fascination with ghosts took a significant U-turn in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, fulfilling a key role within Romanticism and the rise of the Gothic, the sublime, and the uncanny.

Chapter four explores the ghost figure within Gothic and Romantic literary writings and also the stage ghost of the theatre. Unsurprisingly the discussion relies heavily on the well-established impact of MacPherson's *Ossian*, though some brief coverage is also given to other luminaries such as Robert Burns, Walter Scott, and James Hogg. There is an interesting, though perhaps underdeveloped attempt in this chapter to reflect on ghost narratives as indicators of national identity or as symbolic of Scotland's historical past. The discussion on belief, albeit brief and inconclusive, merges well with the fifth and final chapter, which takes a foray into popular culture, including ballads, broadsides, and chapbooks. Comparisons are made with other supernatural beings – namely fairies, brownies, banshees and anomalous lights (*ignis fatuus*) – but overall the ghost as a folkloric figure within society at large is somewhat hastily dealt with.

The first three chapters of the book are, arguably, the strongest, McGill expertly handling the intellectual and theological usages of ghosts. Some small cracks begin to appear by the fourth chapter, which lacks the same level of focus and ideally could engage more fully with the scholarship and debates regarding the tension between the Enlightenment and Romanticism in Scotland. The final chapter, while it is well written, also feels a smidgeon underdeveloped, folk attitudes to ghosts a little less well formed, and the discipline of folklore and folklorists are given a somewhat anachronistic treatment. Nothing new, in other words, has been brought to the table within this chapter, but it does offer a much-needed counterbalance to elite attitudes and perceptions. The concluding chapter provides a handy overview of the shifting functions and confluences of ghosts between religion and belief over time, though it retains the feel of a summary found in a doctoral dissertation, from which this study originated. There are also a few omissions in the bibliography. Nevertheless, minor quibbles aside, this is an impressive entry-level book into the cultural importance of ghosts in Scottish history and a most welcome addition to academic studies of the supernatural.

**Dr Lizanne Henderson, Senior Lecturer in History, School of Interdisciplinary Studies,
University of Glasgow**