

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Hunter. *Atheists and Atheism before the Enlightenment: The English and Scottish Experience*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 280. \$39.99 (cloth).

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Since the 1980s, Michael Hunter has visited the subject of early modern atheism in Great Britain on numerous occasions, investigating the existence of atheism before the Civil Wars as both a negative, hostile discourse (which is easier to find) and as a serious view with real adherents (which requires rather more detective work). The volume is the capstone of four decades of thoughtful research on the problem, with fresh archival evidence to bear on the discussion and points of methodological interest for the historiography of atheism in general.

The first half of *Atheists and Atheism before the Enlightenment* examines general discourses of atheism, starting with an influential 1985 article in which Hunter examines the negative, early modern discourse of “atheism” up to 1640 and contends that the stock atheist figure in anti-atheistic literature was a “mixture of real and exaggerated phenomena” (chapter 2, 56). We move next to a new chapter that serves as a response to Alec Ryrie’s recent book *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (2019). In an essentially methodological chapter, Hunter argues that Ryrie risks synthesizing too many disparate phenomena, and makes a point that religious people who entertained doubts in private should not be too readily conflated with non-religious people who openly denied the teachings of religion and persuaded others of its error (the case studies later in the volume tend to reinforce this distinction). After this, Hunter moves on to discourses of atheism in Great Britain in the Restoration period, which again evince a fluid association between atheism and immorality (chapter 4). Hunter’s command of the textual sources is wide and gives a rounded impression of the fears that surrounded atheism in the period, but throughout he is doubtful that we are facing a bottomless discourse of pure representation. Rather, the personality and beliefs of the stock atheist have a solid plausibility to them which tends to suggest there was a complicated interplay between fact and fiction, a “symbiotic relationship.”

The second half of the volume turns to individual atheists in the period. Hunter believes in the utility of case studies to illuminate the nature of early modern atheism, which is salutary given that avowed, pre-modern atheists are rare and require careful investigation. Individual chapters are devoted to the Scottish atheist Thomas Aikenhead (chapter 5) and the 1739 expulsion of a Cambridge student named Tinkler Ducket, whose conversations and letters provoked charges of atheism and immorality (chapter 8). The indictment against Aikenhead reports that he was an anti-Christian who openly dismissed theology as “faigned and ill-invented nonsense” (97), and that he predicted Christianity would expire by the year 1800. As an alternative to revelation, Aikenhead affirmed the eternity of the world and saw nature as a self-existent being; and for openly promoting these ideas he was hanged at the age of twenty in 1697. The libertine Tinkler Ducket, by contrast, was not—indeed Hunter

suggests Duckett's comparatively light punishment exemplified a complacency toward unbelief that likely facilitated its growth in the eighteenth century (185–6)—but he still faced outrage when his claims were publicly known that he had once “arriv'd at the Top” in his “Progress in Atheism,” and that the institution of marriage was “Priestcraft” (162, 164). He quietly assumed the role of a diplomat thereafter, and would never return to academic life.

Hunter's most compelling find, however, is the atheistic and naturalistic work *Pitcairneana*, which he discovered as a manuscript lurking in a Harvard library and subsequently published in the *Historical Journal* in 2016. The text is presented as the work of Scottish physician Archibald Pitcairne (1652–1713) and was supposedly recovered from his study after his death. The familiar dialogue scheme involves a disagreement between a theist (“Credulous”) and an atheist (“Incredulous”) over the existence of God, but the discussion innovates remarkably from previous literary efforts by presenting the atheist as the ultimate victor. In a series of short arguments summarized at the end as terse “Axioms,” Incredulous rejects the infinity and incorporeal nature of God as self-contradictory, making his existence *a priori* absurd; he instead affirms the eternity of the world, denying the logic of *creatio ex nihilo*. The introduction and text alone (chapters 6, 7) make for essential reading, and even if the authorial attribution is unsound (which is possible, though not compelling) the text remains a remarkable specimen of pre-Darwinian atheism.

Students of the history of atheism, regardless of their allocated time and place, will benefit from this careful and detailed study. In the raft of details, we are given a plausible picture of an atheist in the early modern period, offering in fragments a kind of “anthropology at a distance” where atheism is not a sterile set of propositions but a life lived in history. We learn how an early modern atheist could be educated in an orthodox curriculum (Thomas Aitkenhead was skilled in scholastic disputation at Edinburgh [116–7]), where an atheist could talk about scriptural inadequacies with cosmopolitan company (Pitcairne haunted an Edinburgh wine shop [129]), and what an atheistic library in the period might look like (Pitcairne's personal collection conspicuously favored heterodox books [132]). Hunter shows an investigation into historical atheism requires time and careful induction, and the results here are rewarding. There are very few print errors overall (e.g., Φεολογια 'Σκληκτικη [74] should read Θεολογία 'Εκλεκτική).