

Robert Mudie: Pioneer Naturalist and Crusading Reformer

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Although no longer a familiar name, Robert Mudie was one of the most prominent nineteenth-century descendants of the Scottish Enlightenment. However one defines that Enlightenment – whether as a shared interest in human behaviour and social change,¹ or in terms of natural philosophy and natural knowledge,² or more broadly as the general culture of Scotland’s literati³ – Mudie stands as a representative heir. A polymathic writer, novelist, poet, editor, naturalist and reformer, his very range encapsulated the intellectual daring and untrammelled virtuosity and curiosity of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. But he is also a more problematic figure. For, if he is known at all now in Scottish intellectual history, it is as the author of a venomously negative and sourly satirical account of early nineteenth-century Edinburgh’s intellectual life, *The Modern Athens: a dissection and demonstration of men and things in the Scotch capital* (1825). For Mudie, a self-described ‘modern Greek’, the notion that late Enlightenment Edinburgh was the modern Athens, was, as we shall see, not so much a proud boast as something more pejorative, a telling index of the city’s empty boastfulness. Confusingly for our purposes, Mudie was both an exemplar of Scotland’s post-Enlightenment vigour and a trenchant critic of early nineteenth-century Scotland’s supposed intellectual vitality.

This chapter seeks to illustrate how the work of Robert Mudie could be important for debates concerning, what Paul Wood calls, the ‘temporal limits’ and ‘rival chronologies’ of the Scottish Enlightenment.⁴ After all, as Alexander Broadie notes, what

exactly the Scottish Enlightenment's philosophical afterlife looked like, has yet to be fully explored by historians.⁵ Mudie's wide-ranging writings won him a high profile in nineteenth-century intellectual life. Building on his background as a well-liked teacher in Dundee, Mudie became one of the first great popular educators in print. He wrote diligently and at times eloquently, about the most varied subjects, becoming a popular authority on anything from the bittern, mathematics, China, Australia, India, to astronomy and emigration, and his work seems to have been welcomed by an enthusiastic readership on both sides of the Atlantic, which included Dickens, Darwin, and the American landscape painter Thomas Cole. As such, Mudie might also be viewed, in the present post-Enlightenment context, as one of the last of the polymaths described in the introduction to this volume.

Mudie was born in Forfarshire in 1777 or 1780 to the weaver John Mudie and his wife Elizabeth Bany/Barry. He spent his early years as a shepherd in the Sidlaw Hills, and as an apprentice to his father. However, he was lured from the path that had been set out for him by being introduced to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, to which he would later contribute. According to Alan Lang Strout, Mudie then started out as a weaver in the Bucklemaker Wynd in Dundee, but soon left that occupation.⁶ After about four years in the Forfar and Kincardineshire militia, during which time he spent all the money he could spare on acquiring books and learning, the self-taught remarkable Mudie became teacher of drawing and Gaelic at Inverness Royal Academy around 1802, despite not being able to even 'lisp a word of Gaelic'.⁷ A few years later we find him teaching arithmetic and drawing at Dundee Academy in 1809. Aside from his teaching, it was in Dundee that Mudie began his writing career with the poem 'The Maid of Griban', published in 1810, and the novel *Glenfergus* (1820). Mudie would eventually go on to write a history of the city in *Dundee Delineated* (1822). It was also in Dundee that he started collaborating with R. S. Rintoul (1787–1858), his future fellow Scottish Londoner and founder of the weekly magazine *The Spectator*, and contributing to the latter's *Dundee Advertiser*, which the two used as a vehicle for advocating burgh reform.⁸ However, after writing too many unrestrained verses satirising the members of the town

Council, Mudie is said to have made many enemies, among them Provost William Hackney. Ultimately the town council banded together to oust Mudie from Dundee Academy. These efforts were successful, and he left his position in June 1816. Alan Lang Strout identifies a couple of particularly scathing speeches ‘in connection with the celebration of laying the foundation-stone for the new harbour in October, 1815’ as having sealed Mudie’s fate.⁹ Mudie seems to have remained in Dundee or Edinburgh for a few years following his dismissal, attempting to start two unsuccessful periodicals of his own, the *Independent* (1816) and the *Caledonian Quarterly Magazine* (1821), and putting together various courses of lectures in logic, rhetoric and moral philosophy. He finally left to pursue a literary career in London in 1820 or 1821. It was said that in ‘London, he went among literary people, clever, and prone to laugh. He lectured about everything . . . The chief attraction, however, was the comic grandeur, the broad magnificence, and Doric simplicity of his noble dialect.’¹⁰ Like his future admirer Dickens, Mudie in London began working as a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. In 1822 he was asked to cover George IV’s visit to Edinburgh, which was published as *A Historical Account of His Majesty’s Visit to Scotland* that same year.

Indeed, George IV’s visit to Edinburgh provided the point of departure for Mudie’s darkly burlesque *Modern Athens*. However, what Mudie perceived as genteel Edinburgh’s abject sycophancy towards George IV during his visit to the Scottish capital in 1822 inspired deflationary bathos. Mudie’s barbed account of Edinburgh life opens with an account of the processions, levees and other fooleries of the royal visit. But Mudie’s treatment then switches focus – though without any marked change in tone or register – and begins to unmask the intolerable smugness of Edinburgh’s literati. Edinburgh, it transpires, is a second-rate provincial city – ‘a widowed metropolis’¹¹ – living off memories of its time as a proper national capital and then as the citadel of Scotland’s intellectual golden age. But that golden age was very short-lived, he insists. To be sure, Edinburgh hosted two prominent arbiters of taste in its literary magazines – the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*; but those very names disguised their shallow local roots. However, Edinburgh continued to live off its former glories, not

least 'the sages of the succession of schools' which, shining forth from the modern Athens had 'dazzled and illuminated mankind'.¹² How could one expect that philosophical tradition to endure, queried Mudie the burgh reformer, when the philistines of the town council, who were responsible for the bulk of university appointments, were 'the most unfit patrons of a school of philosophy'?¹³ Moreover, now the lawyers, not the philosophers, were dominant in the city where interest was always seen to conquer principle. Local pride in the achievements of eighteenth-century Scottish philosophy had turned into a perverse form of 'self-adoration', he argued.¹⁴ Mudie stood appalled at the 'brazenfrontedness' of Edinburgh's ongoing 'self-idolatry'.¹⁵ Notwithstanding Mudie's own polymathic range and autodidactic achievement, for him a short-lived Scottish Enlightenment was dead, surviving only as empty, vainglorious boast, a mirage, rather than a living body of philosophy.

Mudie's success in London owed much to his connection with the publisher Charles Knight (1791–1873). Reminiscing about his life as a young publisher in London in the 1820s, Knight wrote in his autobiography about the day a 'huge ungainly Scot' had walked in 'dressed in a semi-military fashion' wearing 'a braided surtout and a huge fur cape to his cloak; spluttering forth his unalloyed dialect, and somewhat redolent of the whiskey that he could find south of the Tweed'.¹⁶ Despite his initial misgivings, the man 'at length interested me', Knight wrote. Out of the many schemes for possible books, Knight selected an urban theme, a volume about London picking up Mudie's earlier account of Edinburgh in *Modern Athens. Babylon the Great*, Mudie's tome about London, became a success, and the social criticism of its sequel *A Second Judgement of Babylon the Great* (1829) may even have inspired some plot elements of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837–9).¹⁷ Admittedly, Mudie's writings on urban life were not immune to the prejudices of the time. In particular, his observations on society are seriously marred by unwelcome passages which exhibit the most horrific antisemitism. Mudie was enigmatic and erratic, his well-deserved reputation as a populariser of natural history and ornithology needs to be set against some unsettling prejudice, and other character flaws.

Mudie's stint as a parliamentary reporter introduced him to some leading political figures, including Henry Brougham. This appears to have led to Mudie's involvement in the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, which the Edinburgh-born Brougham had instituted in 1826 'to promote good and cheap publications for the working class that had become a reading class'.¹⁸ Allegedly, Mudie was chosen to write 'the first published number of the *Library for the People*, on Astronomy'.¹⁹ The idea of a useful library was exported to America too as the American School Library, which included Mudie's *A Popular Guide to the Observation of Nature*. Mudie's American success supports Broadie's thesis that the Scottish Enlightenment 'might indeed be considered Scotland's chief export to America', and it is also a helpful example of what the legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment looked like in a nineteenth-century context.²⁰ The ethos of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge arguably continued to guide Mudie's literary efforts in the decade that followed, which saw the publication of his most significant work in popular natural history in portable form.

From the 1820s onwards, Mudie was a prolific contributor to several fields of enquiry, including history, philosophy, zoology, agriculture and the introduction of machinery. One of his more notable contributions was a heartfelt appeal for the reform of the education of women in *The Complete Governess* (1826). However, his most significant and substantial work was done in natural history, in works such as *The Feathered Tribes of the British Islands* (1834) and *The Natural History of Birds* (1836), as well as his four-part portable series *The Heavens* (1835), *The Earth* (1835), *The Sea* (1835), and *The Air* (1835), and the companion series made up of *Spring* (1837), *Summer* (1837), *Autumn* (1837) and *Winter* (1837). Nor should we forget Mudie's *A Popular Guide to the Observation of Nature* (1832), a paean to observation and the exercise of one's mind. As Mudie wrote, it is

always dangerous to slight little things, for little things are all beginnings; and in obtaining knowledge, and thence enjoyment, it is at the beginning only that we can begin. All those beginnings are in nature . . . Any body too, who possesses the

organ of sense necessary for the purpose, and will exercise that organ, may know those beginnings; and then comes the proper exercise of man.²¹

Mudie went on to say that the ‘neglect of small things is, indeed, the grand error, in consequence of which so many pass in ignorance and heaviness, that life which nature and art (for after all, art is merely the application of nature) are capable of rendering so intelligent and so full of happiness’.²² This approach is exemplified in Mudie’s brilliant disquisition on the egg:

the wonderful part of the matter is, that a body of the form of a pebble, and consisting of a thin shell of lime, lined with a soft membrane, and having within it first a transparent and then a yellow jelly, should have the power, by the action of heat and air alone, of evolving a vast number of animal organs and substances, all differing from each other in different kinds of eggs . . . A careful observer may indeed find that there is in one part of the transparent jelly a little portion which has more consistency than the rest; but still a stretch of fancy is needed before it can be called organization of any kind. So that, if a person were to be told that out of those jellies there were to be evolved bones, and muscles or organs of motion, and nerves for sensation . . . and not only keep itself in perfect order and repair for its appointed time, but become the source of future beings of the same kind, without number and without end, excepting from the bar and hindrance of external circumstances: – if a person who was ignorant of eggs, and the results of hatching were to be told that, or even a small part of it, it would utterly shake his belief in the testimony of the narrator.²³

Mudie’s works on ornithology were much admired, not least for imaginative flights of this sort. His reflections – perhaps still unsurpassed – on the bittern were excerpted and anthologised.²⁴ Mudie’s decorative volumes also benefited from the work of George Baxter, the ‘first British colour printer on a commercial scale’.²⁵ As such, Mudie’s books are not only educational, but works of art in themselves. Indeed, Mudie’s book, *A Popular*

Guide to the Observation of Nature, is a rich, but almost completely overlooked, resource for the understanding of nineteenth-century landscape painting.²⁶ Harriet Martineau (1802–76) celebrated Mudie's works on natural history as 'true poems'. When the 'self-educated Scotchman . . . wrote about things that he understood', she continued, referring in particular to his works in ornithology,

he plunged his readers into the depths of nature as the true poet alone can do. He is another example, as White of Selborne and Audubon were before him, of the indissoluble connexion between a nice and appreciative observation of nature and the kindling of a spirit of poetry.²⁷

It was as a populariser of science that Mudie truly excelled, according to his contemporaries. His writings on natural history were read by the landscape painter Thomas Cole, Charles Darwin and William Henry Hudson, among others.²⁸

However, Mudie's range was not limited to natural history or the sciences. A series of popular works on philosophy and the place of humankind in society bore the stamp of Scotland's Enlightenment legacy: *Mental Philosophy* (1838), *Man, in His Intellectual Faculties and Adaptations* (1839), *Man, in His Relations to Society* (1840) and *Man, as a Moral and Accountable Being* (1840). Moreover, Mudie's *Natural History of Domestic and Wild Animals* (1839) went beyond the normal parameters of the naturalist to address specifically the influence of animals on human society. His work never lost sight of the, sometimes dizzying, interconnectedness and interdependence of living beings and their environments as he tried to encourage a new generation of British naturalists, indebted to the earlier works of the English physico-theologians William Derham (1657–1735) and John Ray (1627–1705).²⁹

Mudie's works had an international reach, and enjoyed some celebrity in the United States.³⁰ Even so, there were already slights and insinuations about Mudie's achievement. One commentator lauded Mudie's oeuvre, for its 'vigorous originality, and long "trails of light"', but noted too, how it was 'obscured here and there by such obliquities of style as we have already adverted to, and which almost invariably characterise a self-educated writer'.³¹

Mudie's profile was a chequered one. He was recognised as a voluminous but rather undisciplined writer and thinker. Even in his own time, Mudie managed to remain something of an outsider. Some blame this on overwork or his drinking, while others draw attention to his financial troubles, or, again, seemingly point to the fact that he was self-taught. Others suggest it was due to his unclubbability. But, as already mentioned, Mudie was involved with the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, as well as the Linnean Society of London, and he was also considered a notable member of St James's Ornithological Society, which was founded to establish 'a collection of water birds in the garden of St. James's Park'.³² Indeed, Mudie was as much a populariser as he was an original thinker. Although his works influenced several of the most notable cultural figures of the nineteenth century, his achievement was largely pedagogic. Yet he remains an indispensable figure for understanding the wider effects and aftermath of the Scottish Enlightenment. Mudie's work is well worth revisiting in part because of its global impact, evidenced by the articles and obituaries that appeared on both sides of the Atlantic following his untimely death in 1842. In the longer run, however, his significance faded. Mudie ended up as a tragic anecdote in the writings of Virginia Woolf on Jane Carlyle (1801–66) and Geraldine Jewsbury (1812–80) in the essay 'Geraldine and Jane' (1929). An ill-timed attempt at reviving his reputation in the years before World War II by the American literature scholar Alan Lang Strout did little to aid Mudie's reintroduction to the canon of nineteenth-century letters.³³

Yet what might have been remembered as an improbably glorious literary career, ended in tragedy. Broken by a few productive, but financially disastrous, years in Winchester, Mudie died destitute in Pentonville in 1842, leaving behind his wife, son and four daughters. *The Spectator* wrote: 'He is dead, and the grave has closed over the remains of a Scottish weaver, who in his time, triumphing over difficulties and obstacles, instructed and amused thousands.'³⁴ Fittingly, the tragedy of Mudie's surviving wife and children was played out in the pages of the periodical press, where an appeal was made on their behalf. This was further immortalised in the correspondence of the Carlyles, who were both involved in

trying to find places for two of Mudie's daughters. Their exasperation with the Mudie girls may have contributed later to a slightly more negative view of the father's legacy.³⁵

From the many varied testimonies of contemporaries – some tintured with mythologising and exaggeration – it is difficult to glean a complete picture of Mudie and his accomplishments. Mudie, self-taught as he was, was apparently fluent in ancient Greek, and his knowledge of geometry supposedly managed to impress the Scottish mathematician and professor at Edinburgh University, John Playfair. Or was he merely a 'radical metropolitan hack', as David Allan refers to him,³⁶ a drunken hack to boot? The need for Mudie to move to London may partly have been a consequence of the demise of the Enlightenment in Scotland, but Mudie's two decades of success, however precarious, in the English capital also suggests that the Enlightenment did indeed live on in the 'murky atmosphere of London' rather than in what Mudie regarded as the deceptively transparent air of Edinburgh.³⁷ Perhaps one might best understand Mudie and his writings as a peculiar product not only of the Scottish Enlightenment, but of interdisciplinary enquiry in an era before specialisation and scientism took hold. Suspended between the eighteenth and nineteenth century, between Scotland and England, between Edinburgh and London, between Georgian and Victorian culture, between the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment, Mudie's role was, above all, that of an intermediary.

Notes

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1. Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 58 (1967), reprinted in *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT, 2010), pp. 17–33, at p. 20. Research for this chapter was generously funded by the British Association for Romantic Studies and the Universities Committee for Scottish Literature.
2. See Roger L. Emerson, 'Science and the Origins and Concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment' in *History of Science* 26 (1988), 333–66. Emerson emphasises the importance of the *virtuosi*, and their leader Sir

Robert Sibbald, to accounts of the Scottish Enlightenment. He also notes the continued relevance of Sibbald's work in the 1760s to John Walker and David Skene. Indeed, this continued even in the work of Robert Mudie, who was familiar with and drew on Sibbald's work in natural history.

3. Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1985: Edinburgh, 2015), p. 8.
4. Paul Wood, 'Defining the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 15 (2017), 299–311, at p. 300.
5. See Alexander Broadie, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 1–8, at p. 7. The history of Scottish philosophy has begun to be addressed in, for example, Gordon Graham (ed.), *Scottish Philosophy in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Oxford, 2015). Mudie is not yet included in accounts of Scottish philosophy. Others may pursue the question of whether he should be. For example, one might explore his *Mental Philosophy* (1838) and its relation to the work of the Scottish philosopher and Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University, Dr Thomas Brown (1778–1820).
6. Alan Lang Strout, 'Robert Mudie, 1777–1842', in *Notes and Queries* (1937), 146–9, at p. 146.
7. Anon., 'The Late Robert Mudie', in *London Saturday Journal* 3 (11 June 1842), 281–3, at p. 281.
8. Strout, 'Mudie', 146.
9. Strout, 'Mudie', 147.
10. Cited in William Norrie, *Dundee Celebrities of the Nineteenth Century* (Dundee, 1873), p. 79.
11. Robert Mudie, *The Modern Athens: a dissection and demonstration of men and things in the Scotch capital* (London, 1825), p. 257.
12. Mudie, *Modern Athens*, p. 161.
13. Mudie, *Modern Athens*, p. 212.
14. Mudie, *Modern Athens*, p. 162.
15. Mudie, *Modern Athens*, p. 253. For Mudie's reflections on the Athens of the North, see especially David Allan, 'The Age of Pericles in the Modern Athens: Greek History, Scottish Politics, and the Fading of the Enlightenment', *Historical Journal* 44 (2001), 391–417.
16. Charles Knight, *Passages of a Working Life During Half a Century: With a Prelude of Early Reminiscences*, vol. II (London, 1864), p. 18.
17. See Eva-Charlotta Mebius, 'Robert Mudie and Dickens: A Possible Source for *Oliver Twist*', *The Dickensian* 115 (Summer 2019), 128–42.
18. William F. Kennedy, 'Lord Brougham, Charles Knight, and The Rights of Industry', in *Economica* 29 (1962), 58–71, at p. 59.
19. Anon., 'The Late Robert Mudie', in *London Saturday Journal*, p. 282.
20. See Broadie, 'Introduction', p. 7.

21. Robert Mudie, *A Popular Guide to the Observation of Nature* (London, 1832), p. 82.
22. Mudie, *Popular Guide*, p. 86.
23. Mudie, *Popular Guide*, pp. 360–2.
24. See the often-reprinted extract from the *Feathered Tribes of the British Islands*: Robert Mudie, 'The Bittern', in *Half-hours with the Best Authors. Selected and Arranged, with Short Biographical and Critical Notices by Charles Knight*, vol. 3 (London, 1847), pp. 55–62.
25. Bamber Gascoigne, *Milestones in Colour Printing 1457–1859: With a Bibliography of Nelson Prints* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 42.
26. For a rare exception and illuminating discussion of Mudie's possible influence on Thomas Cole, see John C. Riordan, 'Thomas Cole: A Case Study of the Painter-Poet Theory of Art in American Painting from 1825–1850' (Syracuse University PhD, 1970).
27. Harriet Martineau, *The History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace: 1816–1846* (London, 1850), II, pp. 696–7.
28. See Eva-Charlotta Mebius, 'Mudie, Robert', in *The Edinburgh Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Writers* (Edinburgh, forthcoming).
29. See also Robert Mudie, *The British Naturalist; or, Sketches of the More Interesting Productions of Britain and the Surrounding Sea, in the Scenes which they Inhabit; and with the Relation to the General Economy of Nature, and the Wisdom and Power of its Author* (London, 1830).
30. J. B., 'Modern English Literary Men', in *United States Magazine, and Democratic Review* 14 (May 1844).
31. Anon., 'The Late Robert Mudie', p. 282 But the writer also speculated that this was due to Mudie's habit of dictating his work to his wife, rather than writing it himself.
32. Anon., 'St. James's Ornithological Society', *The Analyst* 5 (1836), 314–15, at p. 314.
33. Alan Lang Strout was Professor of English at Texas Tech. See also his significant contribution in Robert Mudie, *Things in General*, ed. Alan Lang Strout (Los Angeles, 1939).
34. Anon., 'Mr. Robert Mudie', in *The Spectator* 15 (13 August 1842), 789.
35. For more on the puddlement of Mudieism in which the Carlyles found themselves, see Mebius, 'Mudie and Dickens'.
36. Allan, 'Age of Pericles', p. 392
37. Mudie, *Modern Athens*, p. 46.