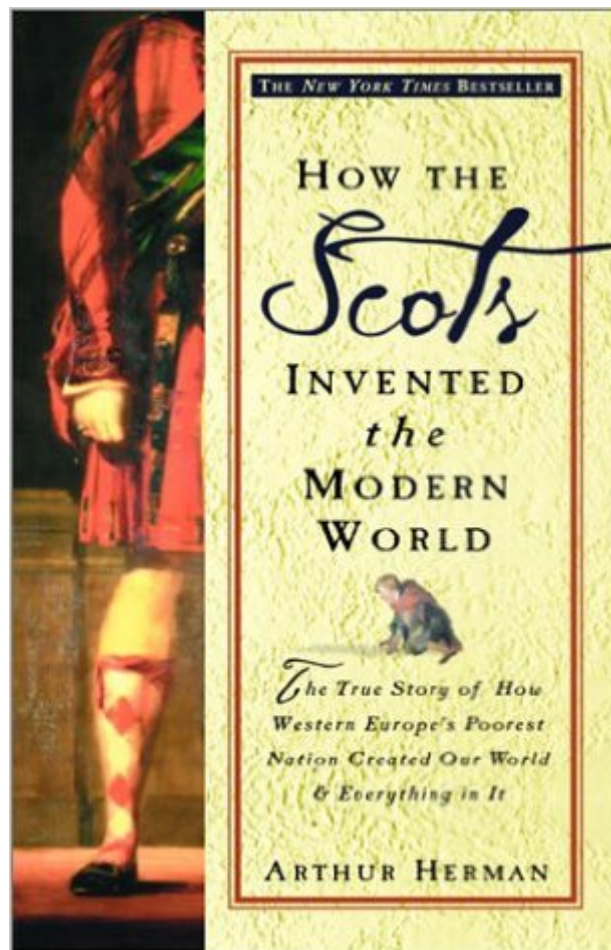


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How The Scots Invented The Modern World: The True Story Of How Western Europe's Poorest Nation Created Our World & Everything In It



Synopsis

Who formed the first literate society? Who invented our modern ideas of democracy and free market capitalism? The Scots. As historian and author Arthur Herman reveals, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Scotland made crucial contributions to science, philosophy, literature, education, medicine, commerce, and politics—contributions that have formed and nurtured the modern West ever since. This book is not just about Scotland: it is an exciting account of the origins of the modern world. No one who takes this incredible historical trek will ever view the Scots—or the modern West—in the same way again.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Some of his more dour Scottish readers may very well tell Arthur Herman that he's mixing in a little bit of nonsense here. HOW THE SCOTS INVENTED THE MODERN WORLD is a glowing tribute to the Scots but he does go over the top a bit in giving them credit for more than they actually achieved, and also more than the Scots ever claimed for themselves. This book however is a serious study of Scotland in the 18th century, particularly the period following the Act of Union with England in 1707 known as the Scottish Enlightenment. THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT is actually the book's UK title but that doesn't mean too much to us here. Far more eye-catching and interesting sounding is the title used for the US edition. This however creates a problem for the author. Its pop-culture sounding theme gives the impression that we will be engaged in competitive national chest-beating such as HOW THE IRISH SAVED CIVILIZATION and comparing lists of who accomplished what as in SPREZZATURA: 50 WAYS ITALIAN GENIUS SHAPED THE WORLD.

Here the Scots supposedly not only CREATED OUR WORLD [but also] EVERYTHING IN IT!. Such claims don't allow the book to be taken very seriously but that is exactly how Herman wants it to be read. It's therefore a credit to him that his presentation of the facts and his arguments are good enough to allow him to make his point. If we were to compile lists, one that would show Scottish prowess would be that of great thinkers of the 18th century. Start with Adam Smith, David Hume, Walter Scott, James Watt and Lord Kelvin. There is also John Stuart Mill. Those who were less thinkers and inventors but doers were David Livingstone and Scottish-Americans such as John Muir and Andrew Carnegie. It is the presence of transplanted Scots like Carnegie which underlies one of the authors main points.

A more conventional title would have been 'The Scottish Enlightenment and its influences on the modern world.' The book is divided into two sections, 'Epiphany' and 'Diaspora'. Few will need an introduction to notions of a Scottish diaspora, but 'epiphany' is an interesting twist on 'Enlightenment'. The conventional academic gloss on the Enlightenment focuses on French appeals to 'reason' culminating in Kant's categorical truths. The followers of Edmund Burke generally dismiss the 'French Enlightenment' as a corruption of the British Enlightenment which focused on 'compassion' rather than 'reason'. Herman takes both to task for forgetting the evangelical sources of our modern world. Herman starts his story with crusty John Knox and his blend of revolutionary violence, predestination and universal literacy. Knox's reliance on the whirling dervish of 'revival meetings' and individual study of biblical sources provides Herman with all he needs to found the enlightened modern world in foggy Scotland. He is not shy about introducing Christian roots to what became an atheist philosophy. The transition from spiritual epiphany to materialist enlightenment might have been an interesting thread, but Herman avoids the issue. It is enough to boost the Scottish role and leave it at that. Personally, I found this all a bit more intriguing than convincing. The leap from Knox (1505 - 1572) to Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) required a detour from church history into the foggy bottom of British politics before emerging with a secular history of the Enlightenment. While I enjoyed getting a Scottish view of the 'English' civil war and detailed account of parliamentary debate over the Treaty of Union (1707), the story is simply too brief.

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