

*The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead:
Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of the
Enlightenment*

by Michael F. Graham

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On 8 January 1697, Thomas Aikenhead, a 20-year-old former student at the College of Edinburgh and convicted blasphemer, was hanged along the road between Edinburgh and Leith. The execution and the trial which preceded it form the core of a new exercise in ‘microhistory’ by Michael F. Graham: taking one small event as the basis for a broader analysis of a society at a particular moment in history. Citing Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginzburg as the pioneers of the technique, Graham examines the tensions and uncertainties of 1690s Scotland, and Edinburgh in particular, and how they led up to what for him amounts to a ritual sacrifice. In doing so, he sets himself the task of reconstructing the mindset of a community—no easy goal, but one which he accomplishes in availing himself of spiritual diaries, private correspondence, newspapers, parliamentary and church records, and pamphlets, among other valuable primary sources.

The execution itself occupies a very small, though arresting, part of the book. Graham is more interested in the conjunction between ecclesiastical and civil power which allowed such an event to occur. It was only the authority of the state, he writes, which could impose physical punishment, so its cooperation was necessary to fulfil the Church of Scotland’s desire to see that crimes against God were punished. His analysis, therefore, involves an investigation

of ‘the historical relationship between “sin” and “crime”’ (p. 5), and how this relationship manifested itself in late seventeenth-century Scotland. A second major theme is the execution’s place in the development of the concept of ‘public opinion’ (p. 6), both in whipping up sentiment against Aikenhead before and during the trial, and in assessing the events in the execution’s aftermath. A final theme running through the book is the irony of a death sentence being carried out ‘for a crime of belief at the end of the era of confessionalisation’ (p. 5) in a city which would soon become known as a centre of intellectual and scientific inquiry in the Scottish Enlightenment.

Debate and books play a large role since *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead* is essentially a history of ideas and politics, beginning with the covenants of 1638 and 1643, an extension to the political sphere of the tradition of personal covenants which had existed since before the Reformation. (p. 18) In chapter 1, Graham offers an admirably succinct digest of the complicated religious upheavals of the seventeenth century, as he builds up a picture of the social, political, intellectual and physical environments of Edinburgh in the 1690s. (pp. 17-25) While it may be tempting to view the Aikenhead case as a threshold between the religiously fervent seventeenth century and the enlightened eighteenth century—a trap which Graham avoids—intellectual debate on religion and philosophy was strong in Edinburgh, a strength perhaps reflected in the attention civil and church authorities put on regulating the debate by enacting or renewing provisions against ‘blasphemy’. Graham details this attention in chapter 2, focusing on the Parliament of 1695, which renewed a 1661 statute outlawing blasphemy and allowing for a death sentence on the first conviction, and which passed a new statute expanding the definition of the crime. (pp. 37-

43) The significance of this legislation lies in the successful efforts of prosecutors, outlined in chapter 5, to charge Aikenhead under the earlier statute by using terminology in the indictment which, while in the first act, had not been included in the second. Hence, they were able to pursue the death penalty, despite it being Aikenhead's first offence. (pp. 102, 110-1)

The structure of the book is generally chronological. Chapter 3 follows on from the two earlier chapters, describing the insecurity in Edinburgh and Scotland in the year of Aikenhead's trial, 1696. Natural disasters, such as fires and famines, combined with a threat of a possible French invasion to create an atmosphere of fear. Graham points out that presbyterian ministers and political figures interpreted the dangers as a form of divine judgment, and that they were seeking a 'potential scapegoat' (p. 75) to purge the immorality and blasphemy which were bringing the disasters upon Scotland. To his credit, Graham does not maintain that Aikenhead's execution was necessarily inevitable, despite the intentions he ascribes to the authorities. The conviction and death sentence were due as much to aspects of Aikenhead's personal character ('a youthful intellectual bravado'—p. 81) and his lack of connections with the higher levels of Edinburgh society, as to a vengeful bloodlust on the part of civil and ecclesiastical leaders.

As an intellectual and political history, herein lies the major potential weakness of *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead*: the focus on state and church leaders in 1690s Edinburgh at the expense of people outside the inner circles of power, religion and education. Graham makes several efforts to overcome this obstacle, particularly in chapter 4, when he steps back from the chronology and discusses Aikenhead himself, his life, family and education, and the broader intellectual environment in which he was educated and from which

he derived the ideas he was convicted of espousing publicly. Aikenhead, who had been orphaned in 1685, was the grandson and son of a burgher, but his family's social status had declined precipitously by the death of his father in 1683. In addition to his social status, we can interpret his profession as placing him outside the centres of power, students rarely being considered educational authorities. Here Graham touches on the psychology of young adults in seventeenth-century Scotland, and the 'spiritual crises' (p. 79) so many underwent. In this context, Aikenhead's trial and execution were not inevitable—the examples of Thomas Halyburton and James Hogg, who later became, respectively, a leading presbyterian educator and a prominent minister, are cited as having experienced similar spiritual troubles in their college and university years. Neither was as outspoken as Aikenhead, however, and both were able to engage with their doubts in a way which led them back to 'conventional Calvinism'. (p. 156)

The lack of attention to the common resident of Edinburgh and its surrounding areas is also relieved by the focus placed on publications released prior to and during the trial, an attempt by Aikenhead's adversaries—in particular Mungo Craig, his classmate at the College of Edinburgh—to try him in 'the court of public opinion' (p. 95) prior to his actual trial. After the execution, Graham addresses public opinion once again, within and outwith Scotland. In Scotland, opinion seems to have hardened in favour of pursuit of blasphemers and witches, while in England, although some were congratulating the Scots for their 'firm stand against heterodox viewpoints' (p. 126), the Aikenhead case inspired embarrassment, especially among Scottish officials in King William's government. Despite a move to replicate the Scots' efforts south of the border, most notably in the 1698 Blasphemy Act, the English authorities

seemed noticeably cooler towards vigorous pursuit. The act itself contained strict provisions on testimony and retractions which tended to protect the accused. (p. 145) Ultimately, the reality of religious diversity in Scotland, which already existed in the 1690s, made prosecutions grind to a halt, both for blasphemy and witchcraft, in the early eighteenth century, though the legacy of Aikenhead's execution was a subject for debate even into the nineteenth century.

This timely volume does not shy away from modern implications of the Aikenhead case: the name Rushdie, among others, arises in connection with it. The continuing conflict between freedom of speech and the sanctity of religious ideas was highlighted again barely two months ago, when Dutch MP Geert Wilders was barred from entering the United Kingdom because of his plans to screen his controversial film on modern Islam and Islamism. Graham has offered us not only a fine addition to the literature on seventeenth-century Scotland, but a portrait of contemporary life all the more vivid due to its relevance to debates we face over three centuries later.