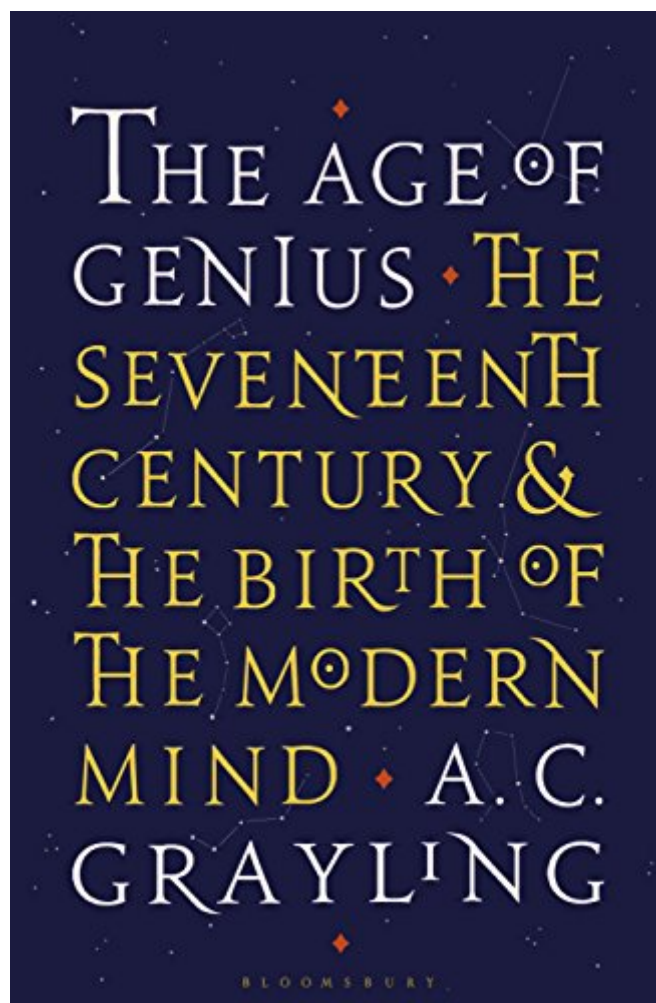


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The Age Of Genius: The Seventeenth Century And The Birth Of The Modern Mind



Synopsis

What happened to the European mind between 1605, when an audience watching Macbeth at the Globe might believe that regicide was such an aberration of the natural order that ghosts could burst from the ground, and 1649, when a large crowd, perhaps including some who had seen Macbeth forty-four years earlier, could stand and watch the execution of a king? Or consider the difference between a magus casting a star chart and the day in 1639, when Jonathan Horrock and William Crabtree watched the transit of Venus across the face of the sun from their attic, successfully testing its course against Kepler's Tables of Planetary Motion, in a classic case of confirming a scientific theory by empirical testing. In this turbulent period, science moved from the alchemy and astrology of John Dee to the painstaking observation and astronomy of Galileo, from the classicism of Aristotle, still favoured by the Church, to the evidence-based, collegiate investigation of Francis Bacon. And if the old ways still lingered and affected the new mind set? Descartes's dualism an attempt to square the new philosophy with religious belief; Newton, the man who understood gravity and the laws of motion, still fascinated to the end of his life by alchemy? By the end of that tumultuous century 'the greatest ever change in the mental outlook of humanity' had irrevocably taken place.

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Customer Reviews

For some reason, I'm finding this book very difficult to review. But simply from the scope of it, it demands a good review, so I'll give it a shot. Its premise is simple enough: that during the seventeenth century the basic paradigm governing intellectual thought made a shift from being medieval, magical, and religious-based to being more modern, rational, and secular-based. And in this argument the author lays out a very strong case. (With a few caveats which I will address shortly). But one of the problems that I found with this text was the way in which he lays out his case. For one, based on his reasoning that the intellectual content of the seventeenth century can not really be understood without a grounding in the political and social history of that period, he gives us what in my opinion is a far too detailed description of the wars of that century, particularly focusing on the period of the Thirty Years War. There are reasons for this, as the Thirty Years War began primarily as a rupture between the Catholic religion and the newly forming Protestant (i.e. Calvinist and Lutheran) religions, and the author contends that it was this rupture in religious thought, and the devastation wrought by this long and bloody war, that first created the opening for modern secular thought to develop. Okay, I can go along with that, but still, a recapitulation of the various battles and political swings of the Thirty Years War that takes up fully the first third of the text seems a bit excessive. (Actually, quite a bit more than a bit). The Thirty Years War is very complex, convoluted, and difficult to follow even in a more lengthy study, and I have a feeling that many readers will be tempted to give up before page 100 and simply toss this book aside in disgust.

"The Age of Genius" is an interesting and well-written political, cultural, and intellectual / scientific history of the 17th century in Europe. Given its scope, it's somewhat condensed at 323 pages but the writing style is clear and the ideas covered in the book reflect the integrated approach of the author and support his recitation of Thucydides's famous quote (in the beginning of the book) that "History is Philosophy teaching by example." The European 17th century begins, more or less, with the last, but most devastating, of the religious wars sparked by the Reformation, the Thirty Years' war, covered in much detail by Grayling, and ends with the publication of Newton's "Principia Mathematica", Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" and the assertion of Parliament's supremacy in England's "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. Grayling's contention is that Europeans entered the 17th century with a late-medieval mindset and emerged at the end of the century with a modern mindset, one that was skeptical of political absolutism, exhibited more religious tolerance, and allowed scientific inquiry to proceed without the impediments of religious doctrines. He further makes the claim that no century exhibited more of a change in the mental perspective of Europeans than the

17th century. Many of his examples come from Protestant Europe, largely England, and one can easily find examples on the continent of contrary movements, e.g., Louis XIV's (the "Sun King") reign in France was of course not a lessening of political absolutism, nor was his revocation of the Edict of Nantes that protected French Calvinists a move toward religious tolerance.

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