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Alexander the Corrector: The Tormented Genius Whose Cruden&8217;s Concordance Unwrote the Bible

Julia Keay
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The author (who also wrote *The Spy Who Never Was* and *Passport and Parasol*) tells the truly amazing story of Alexander Cruden (1699—1770), whose life teetered between fame and fortune and persecution and incarceration. Cruden, born to humble family in Aberdeen, laboriously studied the classics and divinity, hoping to take holy orders. Love, not labor, was his undoing: he fell for a pseudo-innocent incestuously involved with her brother. Pregnancy threatened, and the cover-up required the lovesick Cruden's consignment to the local jail. His naïveté and love of scholarship persisted after his post-release shift to London, where he maintained himself as a "corrector to the press"—a proofreader.

While laboring on the *Concordance of the Bible* (of which 2.5-million-word resource he was the sole researcher, compiler, proofreader, printer and seller), Cruden attempted to become "reader in French" (which he couldn't pronounce correctly) to the erudite Earl of Derby, who could, and who decisively turned him down. He made a second futile bid for the job and for matrimony. The earl did not oblige, nor did the wealthy widow upon whom Cruden pressed his unrealistic and largely epistolary suit. Her other suitor acted forcefully—and again Cruden experienced the horrors of a lunatic asylum.

A certain saintliness shines though Cruden's sufferings: despite being forcibly carried off to asylums by hostile parties because of his love-hopes, "he never dropt a word tinctured with fretfulness, passion, private or personal revenge," even though (during his third incarceration) he was purged, bled, given "vomits," handcuffed, and even chained to his bed. Escape, recapture, a further escape, and an unsuccessful lawsuit against his beloved's savage suitor followed.

Such are the major events around which Keay weaves a magical narrative embracing publishing and patronage, courts and commoners, the horror of unchallengeable captivities in private madhouses, manipulations of justice, and pioneering fact-finding (in tracing the double helix of fate which ever threatened Cruden with his troubled first love). A deserved final reward was forthcoming. Relieved of his persecutors, admired for and rewarded by his mighty *Concordance* and his incisive pamphlets detailing his incarcerations and calling for reform, Cruden appointed himself "Corrector General of the People," to be received by admiring crowds, which he attempted to lead back to Christian virtue.

Keay describes a life that is heroic even when tragic, skillfully presenting it against the backdrop of the exuberant rough-and-tumble eighteenth century. Her analysis of the "mad doctor" industry and the notorious Drs. Monro, father and son, and their power and connections to the law, is indeed disturbing.

Apposite illustration and a full bibliography add to Keay's book; interested readers will also enjoy Andrews and Scull's study of the Monros and Edith Olivier's charming but superseded 1934 biography of Cruden.
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