

4. The Scottish Enlightenment

Introduction

This brief sketch outlines how the Scottish Enlightenment developed, against the backdrop of Union with England in 1707. It continues with a peek into clubs and societies that provided stimulus, discussion, argument and cross-pollination of ideas, and concludes with a biography of four famous people associated with this important movement.

In the 18th century, Enlightenment ideas spread across Europe. At its heart was the desire to investigate and debate philosophical and scientific ideas publicly, free from examination by authoritarian institutions. An example in England was the Lunar Society, formed at the birth of the Industrial Revolution in the late 1750s. There is precious little doubt that the Union of Scotland and England was a major context for the Scottish Enlightenment. To what extent the substantial cultural achievements of Scotland in the 18th century benefited from the Union - and to what extent they would have occurred had there been no Union - is still contested.

From 1707 both countries were ruled by a Westminster parliament and a Hanoverian king. This was the broad constitutional context within which, from about the 1720s, Scotland began to live through an Age of Enlightenment, peaking between 1750-1800. High culture was the equal of anything to be found elsewhere in Europe. Its thinkers, the 'literati', made immense contributions to science, geology, philosophy, moral and social thought, historical analysis, economics and medicine. Ground-breaking discoveries were made with major contributions also to literature. This collective intellectual achievement involved a wide network of men who shared social and professional ties and who regularly exchanged and debated their ideas.

The National Library of Scotland refers also to the 'Statistical Account of Scotland', edited by one of the great figures of the Enlightenment, Sir John Sinclair. His 'Statistical Account' is an endlessly rich mine of information about Scotland towards the end of the 18th century. It offers insights into human, economic, cultural and technical resources, including farming methods. Many improvements were devised by landowners, experimenting with crop rotation, and use of lime and marl on soil. They successfully cleared vast swathes of land of bog and mosses to make land more productive and economically viable, learning from England too.

Another area of improvement was in the hands of architects and town planners, their most spectacular success being Edinburgh New Town. Built on a grid plan, with wide, airy streets and splendid domestic architecture, it was a beautiful new district in which the comfortable middle classes, lawyers, merchants and professors, could feel at home. Although the plan to build the New Town in the form of the Union Jack was not accepted, names of streets tell a Unionist story: Hanover Street, George Street, Queen Street, Princes Street, Charlotte Square, Frederick Street; all references to a political Union under a Hanoverian monarch.

The literati were a sociable and convivial group, meeting in scores if not hundreds of clubs and societies in the university centres and elsewhere. They discussed a wide range of topics, theoretical and practical. One, which held the attention of many in Scotland, concerned the Gaelic bard Ossian son of Fingal, whose two works 'Fingal' and 'Temora' were 'discovered' and 'translated' by James Macpherson. A dispute arose almost immediately as to the authenticity. Some thought Macpherson a cheat who translated nothing but had simply written the English works to pass off as translations from Gaelic. Yet the poems took Europe by storm. Success, in terms of impact on authors, composers and artists, dwarfed the dispute about authenticity, rendering the dispute almost irrelevant and a sideshow.

In questioning and debating within such illustrious circles, rivalry between academics was not uncommon in criticising and challenging ideas and beliefs. A pamphlet thought to have been written by historian Gilbert Stuart attacked the character of noted historian William Robertson. As well as holding a position with the University of Edinburgh, Robertson led the 'Moderates' in the Church of Scotland, a group supporting Catholic toleration. Robertson's abilities as a historian and his religious sympathies were brought into question. For good measure, Stuart attributed the success of Robertson as a historian to cheap tricks and his indulgent patronage.

Clubs & Societies

The Scottish Enlightenment marked a paradigm shift from religion into reason. Everything was examined: art, politics, science, medicine and engineering, underpinned by philosophy. They thought, discovered, discoursed, experimented, wrote and above all questioned – from the world around them, from Adam Smith's treatise on the economy to Hume's Human Nature; Fergusson's discourse on history to Hutcheson's ideas and ideals, such as what is it that makes something beautiful and do people need religion to be moral?

The Select Society was established in Edinburgh on 22 May 1754 by the artist Allan Ramsay. Weekly meetings were held in the Advocates Library, the forerunner of the National Library of Scotland. Aims of the society were 'the pursuit of philosophical enquiry and the improvement of the members in the art of speaking'.

The Edinburgh Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Sciences, Manufactures and Agriculture was set up by the Select Society in 1755 and then became independent. As well as debating subjects relating to 'trade, agriculture and improvement of arts' in Scotland, the society was active in awarding 'premiums', or prizes, for 'superior merit or industry.'

Many key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment knew each other well, both professionally and socially. The 'literati', or intellectuals, based mainly in the university locations of Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews and Aberdeen, were often members of the same clubs and societies. These ranged from literary, philosophical and scientific debating societies, to more convivial dining and drinking clubs in taverns. Whatever their remit, they all encouraged lively debate, mutual improvement, and exchange of ideas.

The 18th-century clubs and societies were also characterised by their cross-disciplinary focus. Boundaries between different subject areas were not as fixed as they are today. It was quite common for philosophers, artists, scientists, churchmen, and lawyers to be members of the same society and to share ideas and discoveries from their different fields of knowledge. The membership of the more convivial drinking and dining clubs often spanned different social and professional classes – advocates and surgeons rubbed shoulders with bakers and builders.

The Philosophical Society of Edinburgh was established in 1737, growing out of the Society for the Improvement of Medical Knowledge. They discussed, and often published, accounts of 'discoveries and improvements' in medicine and science. The publications were a forerunner of contemporary medical and scientific journals. The Philosophical Society was absorbed into the newly formed Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1783 and continues to this day as Scotland's national academy.

The Cape Club was one of many 18th-century convivial clubs that met in taverns. It is thought that the club was established sometime in the 1730s, but, according to one source, the name dates from 1764. The Cape Club was named after the distinctive 'cape' or headgear worn by the Sovereign, or president. The Sovereign also carried two specially made household pokers

as a symbol of his authority. All members, or Knights Companions of the Cape, were sworn to secrecy about meetings. Each one took on a pseudonym based on a personal characteristic, for example Sir Silence, Sir Heavy-hours, and Sir Complaints. Notable members of the Cape Club included the poet Robert Fergusson, Deacon William Brodie, and the painter Sir Henry Raeburn.

Adam Ferguson held the position of Keeper of the Faculty of Advocates Library before he became Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. During this time he published his work on civil society. The 'Essay' is an interpretation of how nations advance morally and economically to become the commercial state of society. Ferguson drew on classical history, applying principles to society at the time. The work promoted civic virtue through citizens' participation in political life. It was highly critical of unscientific 'conjectural history', a way of studying the past which allows for speculation about causes of events.

David Hume 1711 - 1776

The second son an advocate, David Hume rejected a law career, instead choosing to pursue philosophy. His first published work in 1739 -1740, '*A Treatise of Human Nature*', comprised three books: *Understanding as the basis of knowing*; '*Passions*', *the emotional response of humans* and third, *Moral goodness in expressing feelings of approval or disapproval*. It was hardly a best seller, prompting Hume to comment it 'fell dead-born from the press'.

His next two works fared little better: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and *An Enquiry Concerning The Principles Of Morals* (1751). His fame as a great philosopher came only after his death with publication of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779).

Hume shared with Locke the basic empiricist premise that it is only from experience that our knowledge of the existence of anything outside ourselves can be derived ultimately. What we contemplate are sensory experiences, thoughts, memories and perceptions etc. These are, at best, fleeting impressions of hopeful probabilities, not certainties. We are bounded by, and limited to, our own experiences and interpretations.

This applied to religion also and observable evidence of God's existence. Hume contended that what is often claimed is inferential, indirect and vague, lacking any observable evidence. Feelings of certainty are not knowledge as, for an effect to be known, its causality has to be understood. We think we understand a sequence of events but we may not comprehend any causal connection and how one event brings about another. We may expect it to be so but logical proof may be lacking This includes the vexed issue of induction, leaping from a finite number of experiences to form a general conclusion.

Much admired in France and Germany for his thoughts and clarity of expression, he impressed Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer as well as English philosophers Bertrand Russell and A.J.Ayer and also Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The massive contribution of David Hume to philosophy and critical thinking has endured. So has his legacy to question certainty in an uncertain and media dominated world.

James Hutton 1726 - 1797

It had always been accepted without question that God had created the world in seven days at some point in the past. Antiquated accounts of Scottish history were related back to the Garden of Eden and nobles, such as Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty, claiming they could trace their ancestry back through 143 generations to Adam. In the late 17th century, Christian

theologians formed the belief, based on precise calculations derived from their examination of the Bible, that the date of world creation could be pinpointed to 4004 BC.

The belief was never questioned until James Hutton, religious sceptic and geologist, examined the rocks of Scotland. The secrets of time, he discovered, were not written in books but in the rocks. To a geologist, a rock is a page of the Earth's autobiography with an unfolding story to tell. Hutton demonstrated how to read rocks which revealed the significance of 'deep time'.

At Siccar Point, in Berwickshire, Hutton spotted an unconformity in the land where different kinds of rock, volcanic and sedimentary, overlaid each other, tilted up. From this he deduced the geological processes that had created the Earth were extremely ancient indeed and that the Earth had: 'no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end.'

According to Creationists, the creation of the Earth was a unique event, but Hutton couldn't believe that the laws of nature shaping the Earth were different from the laws of nature that apply today. For Hutton, the same natural processes applied and did not rely on preternatural events. In a leap of imagination he announced, 'time is to nature endless and as nothing,'

Through his recognition of the possibility of limitless time he suddenly saw how natural forces had shaped the Earth's surface, not over 6,000 years but over many millions of years. Hutton believed, like other Enlightenment thinkers, that findings of science, and not tradition, should be the basis of laws of the universe and that any theory should be established by observation and testing of hypotheses against the evidence.

At Jedburgh he found scientific evidence to prove his theories. The River Jed had exposed a rock face. It showed that the Borders had once been part of the ocean bed, had then become dry land, then ocean again, before finally becoming the land mass we know today.

More evidence came at Glen Tilt in Perthshire where he explored deposits of granite. Hutton disproved his contemporaries' theories that granite had been formed in the singular creation of the world. He found granite deposited above other rocks laid down on an old sea bed. This led him to theorise the creation of granite had been a repeatable process and not a singular one. It was his Eureka moment. Hutton published the results of his studies in *A Theory of the Earth* in 1785. His ideas and evidence form the basis of modern geology.

Robert Adam (1728 - 1792)

Robert Adam was an immensely important architect working in 'Neoclassicism'; a movement in decorative and visual arts, drawing inspiration from the 'classical' art and culture of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Born in Kirkcaldy, he was the son of the established architect William Adam and followed him into the family practice. In 1754 he embarked on a Grand Tour, spending five years in France and Italy visiting classical sites. He studied architecture under French draughtsman Charles-Louis Clérissseau and Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi. On his return, Adam established his own practice in London with his brother James.

Although classical architecture was already becoming popular, Adam developed a distinctive and highly individual style which was applied to all elements of interior decoration from walls, ceilings and floors to furniture, silver and ceramics. The 'Adam Style', became highly popular with a lasting influence on British architecture and interior design.

Letters from Adam whilst in Italy in 1757 show he intended to become the most prominent architect in Britain. This was a normal aspiration for a young British architect on the Grand

Tour, but Adam was unusual in wanting to bring to Britain what he called the "one true grand and simple style". Unlike many contemporaries, Adam did not have a ready-made network of noble friends and relations but what he lacked in contacts was made up by his determination and drive, coupled plenty of luck. He was often in the right place at the right time.

On his return in 1758, Adam was invited to Kedleston Hall, having impressed its owner, Lord Scarsdale, with his Italian drawings. Scarsdale was having a house constructed and James Stuart, another pioneer of Neoclassicism, was working on the interiors. Adam was able to get Stuart dismissed from the project by attacking his Neoclassical designs as "so excessively and ridiculously bad they begged all description." He then completed the house himself. Adam's Scottish origins played a crucial part in helping him to become appointed by many prestigious clients. Lord Bute, a fellow Scot and minister of King George III, aided Adam's appointment as royal architect along with William Chambers.

Adam's own theory of design was based on the principle of 'movement' – the rise and fall, and advancement and recession of forms. The essence of the 'Adam Style' lay in his use of ornament. Looking back in 1812, English architect, Sir John Soane refers to the Adam Style as "...light and fanciful...This taste soon became general; everything was Adamitic."

Another crucial element was his insistence on stylistic coherence across every element of his interiors. The idea of co-ordinated design had become widespread in Britain – encouraged by the relative ease with which repetitious and regular Neoclassical ornament could be produced in flat patterns or in low relief, quite easily fitted together in different combinations. The Adam brothers' lavish publication, *Works in Architecture*, published in parts from 1773, played a very significant role in disseminating their style and included illustrations encouraging the idea of the total interior.

Characteristically boastful, the brothers stated that Graeco-Roman examples should "serve as models which we should imitate, and as standards by which we ought to judge". His version of the Neoclassical set off a revolution in style in Renaissance paintings and room decorations that by the early 1760s was adapted for modern usage. Neoclassicism took about ten years to spread beyond the fashionable elite. By the early 1770s neo-classical furniture penetrated the general market. In 1774, John Carter, architect described a pair of Adam-style panels shown in the *Builder's Magazine* as being "in the present reigning taste."

Adam Smith (1723 - 1790)

Adam Smith, a moral philosopher and economic thinker, is widely considered as the father of modern economics. As with Robert Adam he was born in Kirkcaldy. His father, a lawyer and comptroller, died two months before he was born. On leaving an outstanding school at 14 he studied at the University of Glasgow under the influential philosopher, Francis Hutcheson. He was awarded a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, spending six years studying European literature. He developed a contempt for an elite English education, complaining that teachers had "given up altogether even the pretense of teaching."

Now living in Edinburgh around 1748 he met and began a life-long friendship with David Hume, also a former student of Hutcheson. At 28, Adam Smith became Professor of Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. His lectures formed the basis of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), meeting with great acclaim in Britain and across Europe.

The prevailing view of economics was national wealth expressed as gold and silver. Importing goods was seen as damaging because wealth had to be expended whilst exporting goods was considered beneficial in returning precious metals, the barometer of a nation's economy.

Countries maintained a vast network of controls to prevent metal wealth draining out – taxes on imports, subsidies to exporters and protection for domestic industries. Protectionism also applied within the economy of Britain. Cities prevented artisans from other towns moving in to ply their trade, manufacturers and merchants petitioned the king for protective monopolies, and labour-saving devices were banned as a threat to existing producers.

Smith showed that this vast 'mercantilist' edifice was folly. He argued that in a free exchange, both sides became better off. The buyer profits as well as the seller. Imports are as valuable to use as exports are to others. Because trade benefits both sides, it increases prosperity just as surely as do agriculture or manufacture. A nation's wealth is not the quantity of gold and silver it has but the total value of its production and commerce viz gross national product.

Smith had a radical, fresh understanding of how human societies actually work. He realised social harmony emerges naturally if we find ways to learn, live and work together for the betterment of society. A prospering social order would then grow organically and operate in an open, competitive marketplace with free exchange and without coercion.

The Theory Of Moral Sentiments established Smith's reputation, in applying social psychology as the foundation of human morality. He believed the 'natural sympathy' of humans enables an understanding how to moderate behaviour and preserve harmony. He related this to *The Wealth Of Nations* as economics also concerns life, welfare, political institutions and the law.

The writing and views of Adam Smith had a profound impact on generations of economists from David Ricardo and Karl Marx to John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman. His work helped lay down moral and economic foundations for a great part of the modern world.

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