While the Scottish enlightenment tends to be academic that of London suffered from the lack of rigorous and systematic work particularly in philosophy. Market conditions and competition told against the English producers of the very genres in which the Scots excelled.

If I am correct in thinking that we can discriminate four kinds of enlightened cities in the eighteenth century with rather different preoccupations, it makes sense to ask if there was a common European, a cosmopolitan enlightenment. I believe there was and that it is to be found in the questioning, the daring to know and the willingness to act upon rationally grounded knowledge which came to Europeans between c. 1660 and c. 1780. Needless to say the eighteenth century saw a great deal of thinking and action which was unenlightened. Indeed, those who were wholly and consciously committed to enlightenment were few (as Kant noted) and sometimes they experienced a despair to which Hume gave eloquent expression. Many were only partially enlightened and were not always daring in their inquiries. Everywhere the numbers concerned with reason and nature varied, as did the time of their appearance. Nevertheless the enlightenment as a style and fashion of thinking and acting informed the outlook of most of the first rate thinkers and doers who made lasting contributions to European culture during this period. But the cosmopolitan enlightenment did not affect every city at the same time or in the same way. The size and complexity of cities put limits to the problems which occurred to men in different circumstances just as they restricted the actions of the enlightened. To observe those limits is to gain a deeper understanding of what enlightenment meant to men in the eighteenth century.

Roger Emerson

The Scottish enlightenment remains one of the most puzzling phenomena of eighteenth-century cultural history. It is true that the last two decades have seen a steady flow of scholarly books and monographs on particular Scottish thinkers and upon some of those particular areas of thought — such as metaphysics, the social sciences, literature and criticism — for which enlightened Scots were so justly celebrated. Yet it is still difficult to see exactly why Scotland should have developed so vigorous a cultural life in the eighteenth century and why it was that by the second half of the century, she should have become one of the major sources of contemporary western culture.1 As Joseph de Maistre once said of the Port Royal and its intellectuals, "Je vois bien des abeilles mais point de ruche."

In this paper I want to think about the hive rather than the bees and more especially about the development of the relations between Edinburgh's intellectuals and the wider society of which they were part during the eighteenth century. I shall confine my discussion to Edinburgh not simply for reasons of convenience, but because there is an important sense in which the history of the Scottish enlightenment is the history of Edinburgh. Throughout the century the cultural life of the city dominated that of Scotland. It attracted intellectually-minded peers and country gentlemen, learned country ministers, professors from Aberdeen

and Glasgow and ambitious young men in search of intellectual excitement as well as a career. From the city's clubs, salons, class-rooms and taverns emerged a dominant cultural style built on distinctive ideological and intellectual foundations to which learned Scotsmen might respond or against which they could react. Indeed by the 1750s, such was the vigour, sophistication and reputation of learning in Edinburgh, that some of its citizens, like the dramatist John Home, were beginning to think of the city as a modern Athens in which men sought fame through learning rather than through politics or war. Others like the painter Allan Ramsay thought of it as the Athens of Britain, the source of those polite and useful values necessary to guide the leaders of a progressive society. Soon a romantically minded European public would think of Edinburgh, more ambiguously, as the Athens of the North.

Why did Edinburgh society take intellectuals and their work so seriously in the second half of the century? Did this influence the way in which philosophers and poets thought about the highly technical business of writing philosophy and poetry? Such questions are, in the last resort questions about the function of culture in the elite society of Edinburgh; they require us to consider that society's changing image of itself and its place in the world around it, the particular hopes and anxieties this aroused and the part intellectuals played in provoking and allaying them. It is only in this context that the status of intellectuals and the importance of cultural activity to Edinburgh's society becomes comprehensible.

Eighteenth-century Edinburgh, like Dublin, Boston, Naples, Bordeaux or Nancy, was the capital city of a province of a great monarchy. That is to say it was the centre of the legal, administrative and political life of the surrounding province and the focal point of the collective life of a provincial governing elite. Provincial capitals normally possessed some sort of representative assembly, governors' courts, law courts and perhaps a bishop's

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palace and a university and their social life was dominated by those landed and mercantile interests who controlled these institutions and much of the political life of the province. Moreover, the remarkable degree of autonomy most provinces enjoyed by the middle of the century, meant that provincial elites were free to govern their province in their own way with only minimal interference from the metropolitan centre of government. Ideologically this meant that some elites — and notably those in the cities just mentioned — had a strong sense of local pride. They thought of themselves as the legitimate guardians of provincial liberties and as agents of improvement who would modernise their province by means of energetic, intelligent and public-spirited leadership and draw it from a state of rudeness to one of cosmopolitan refinement.*

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Edinburgh fitted this pattern fairly closely. It was the seat of a provincial assembly (the Scots parliament), a Privy Council, the Court of Session (the supreme Scottish court of law) and the General Assembly of the Scottish church. It possessed a small and impoverished university whose primary function was to prepare boys from humble backgrounds for the ministry. It was the focal point of the collective life of the Scottish governing elites — which may be defined as those landed and mercantile interests which controlled the institutions of local and central government and were represented in the Scots parliament. In the last quarter of the seventeenth century it is clear that this elite had begun to think of Parliament and Privy Council as institutions which could be used to promote the economic improvement of their country. At first their campaign was desultory, spasmodic and of limited practical
The Union had a decisive though rather unexpected effect on the social life of Edinburgh. The terms of the Act of Union ensured that the city would remain the centre of church government and of the legal system. What was more surprising was that it remained an important political centre. Contemporaries had feared, reasonably enough, that without a parliament and privy council to draw them to Edinburgh the Scottish governing elite — and particularly the nobility — would spend their time in London and leave Edinburgh stripped of its aristocratic society as well as its traditional political function. However, although the Union involved the dismantling of the Scots parliament and Privy Council, English ministers soon found it convenient to leave Scottish political and administrative business to a “manager” who had no constitutional existence but who contemporaries looked on as “the uncornered king of Scotland”; the most notable of these were Archibald, 3rd Duke of Argyll who “reigned” almost continuously from 1725 to 1761 and Henry Dundas who “reigned” from 1784 until 1801.

The reasons for this development are not hard to discover. As far as the English were concerned, Scotland was a long way from London (fourteen days expensive travel at a cost of around £12-14 in the early part of the century). And anyway Englishmen knew little about Scotsmen and Scottish affairs and tended to react as John Wilkes reacted to a Scottish election case: “I have nothing to do with it! I care not which prevails! It is only Goth against Goth!” But the main reason was more fundamental than English insularity. Only the richest of Scots could afford to play the expensive game of aristocratic politics in London and given the backward state of the economy that meant that only the greatest nobility could afford to take the high road to London in 1707 and leave their great houses in Edinburgh’s Canongate to degenerate into slums. The sixteen representative peers and forty-five M.P.s made their way south more reluctantly, heavily subsidised from secret

5. Ibid.
7. J. Boswell, A Letter to the People of Scotland on the Alarming Attempts to Infringe the Articles of the Union and Introduce a Most Prejudicial Innovation by Diminishing the Number of the Lords of Session, London, 1785, pp. 70-71.

4. Phillipson, “Culture and Society.”
service funds which paid for visits to the metropolis they could ill afford to make. Until the 1750s the minor nobility and more substantial gentry were content to lead Scottish-oriented lives focussed on the familiar, cheerful and economical pleasures of Edinburgh.8

From 1707 to the 1780s the entire life of the city was dominated by successive generations of around 400 families of minor nobility and substantial gentry, closely knit by kinship and by marriage. This landed society monopolised the bench of the Court of Session and the Scottish bar (the Faculty of Advocates).9 After the passing of the Patronage Act of 1712, they could provide ministers with livings and schoolmasters with employment. They could offer doctors lucrative practice and professors prestigious pupils and the prospect of well-paid tutorships which would rescue them from the hurly-burly of university life. It was the fact that Edinburgh remained the focal point of the collective life of much of the Scottish landed class that ensured that Edinburgh would function de facto if not de jure as a provincial capital. And it is Edinburgh’s elite society, its collective needs, its expectations and cultural life that we need to understand if we are to understand the social foundations of the Scottish enlightenment. I want to discuss Edinburgh’s elite society first of all with relation to the period 1720-40 when their poverty confined expectations to Scotland and to Edinburgh. Then, I want to discuss the changes that the prospect of increased landed wealth brought to the following generation which came to dominate the social life of the city in the 1750s, the high period of the Scottish enlightenment.

II

The position of Edinburgh’s aristocratic society immediately after the union was certainly perplexing. After all, the men who had been left stranded in Edinburgh formed the rump of a once homogenous and highly motivated governing class, which had been deeply aware of its role as the legitimate guardians of a province and as the proper agents of its improvement. Their poverty confined their expectations to a life in Scotland; their inherited ideology encouraged them to believe that the Union was a necessary precondition for attaining progress and that their own role in securing that progress was of great importance. But from 1707 until the early 1720s problems of economic readjustment and a lack of any real economic growth coupled with political and ecclesiastical unrest as disturbing as anything they had hitherto experienced, showed them that the Union was not the instant panacea they had hoped it would be. Some voiced their disappointment in Jacobitism, but not all found much to satisfy them in an ideology which was associated with despotism, catholicism and a tribal, highland society which most lowlanders despised. It was not until the 1730s that these upheavals were over that the minor nobility and substantial gentry found the collective self-confidence to assert that they, after all were the legitimate heirs of the old Scottish governing elite. They did this by establishing an institution which not only gave them a formal collective existence but became associated with an ideology which derived from that which had animated the old parliamentary elite in the years immediately before the union. This institution was the Honourable the Society for Improvement in the Knowledge of Agriculture.

The Society was founded in 1723 and lasted until 1745.10 It was the first of its kind in Britain and the model for those that followed. Its 300 members were drawn almost exclusively from the nobility and more substantial gentry. Its primary function was to provide instruction in scientific agriculture according to the best examples the modern world could provide and, more generally, to encourage the spread of agricultural improvement throughout Scotland. But soon its horizons widened and it began to advocate a more general programme of economic improvement – notably in the fields of linen manufacture and fishing – and, once again, they sought to do this by emulating the best models.
that the modern world could provide. What is interesting about this programme is the way in which the interests of the Society gradually extended from the improvement of agriculture – to advocating a general programme of economic improvement which was the same in substance and ideological form as that which had been pursued before the union by the Scots governing elite. In doing this, they were quite aware that they were setting themselves up as a modern-minded, patriotic elite, responsible for their country’s fortunes. As their secretary, Robert Maxwell of Arklund, wrote,

If the Agriculture and Manufactures were improved and carried on to the height they could bear, we might be near as easy and convenient in our circumstances as our sister kingdom of England, seeing neither our soil or climate is unfriendly and since we enjoy the same Privileges of Trade with them. If we are far behind, we ought to follow the faster.

If the society were to be judged solely by its success in stimulating economic growth, it would be of little interest to the historian. Its importance lies in what it tells us about the image the Scottish governing elite had of itself as the legitimate rulers of a province for whose improvement they felt responsible. It is important to realise that this development was not peculiar to Scotland. Similar societies were appearing at much the same time in the west; those of Dublin and Bordeaux are notable examples. Moreover in considering the cultural life of Edinburgh in this period, we must remember that it, too, was developing in much the same way as that of similar provincial capitals. In other words, to anticipate part of my conclusion, I shall argue that by 1740, Edinburgh’s cultural life was exactly what one would expect to find in a western provincial capital possessing a vigorous, self-consciously modern-minded elite. And I shall want to go on to argue that the extraordinary upsurge of intellectual vitality that took place in the 1750s, which is unique to Edinburgh, was a function of an ideological crisis within the governing class, precipitated by an important change in their expectations of life which was itself the function of rapid economic growth.

The characteristic institutions of Edinburgh’s cultural life between the 1720s and 40s were the club and the college. From the 1710s onwards, Edinburgh began to proliferate a myriad of tiny clubs and societies. They were seldom more than ten or twelve strong and seldom survived for more than two or three years. They were highly formal in structure, hedged in with elaborate rules to prescribe the correct manner in which debates should be conducted and essays prepared. Their members came from every section of Edinburgh society. There were gentlemen and artisans, whigs and Jacobites, presbyterians and episcopalian, advocates and ministers, professors and doctors. Their only common characteristic was their youth and the fact that they were about to embark on careers which would probably confine them to Scotland. In other words, like the aristocratic improvers, they were men whose expectations of life were firmly confined by the limits of the life of provincial Scotland. The College, for its part, had undergone a root and branch reorganisation. In the 1690s it had had been little more than a backwoods presbyterian seminary; by the 1720s a secularised institution, modelled on the university of Leiden, seeking to cater for a clientele of gentlemen. Soon it would emerge as Leiden’s successor and would be recognised as one of the most influential centres of higher education in the west.

Through these institutional channels Edinburgh society absorbed all the essential attributes of western polite provincial culture. The Tatler and Spectator were widely studied, and local imitations, like the Tatler of the North by “Donald McStaff” proliferated. So did elegant editions of classical and neo-classical authors, periodicals devoted to the production of polite verse and


12. The following discussion is based on Phillipson, “Culture and Society.”
polite journalism by local authors and authoresses. The philosophy of Locke and Newton, Shaftesbury and Butler, courses in universal history and useful sciences like mathematics and experimental medicine came to be seen as fundamental to the values of a polite society and to a proper education. At the same time, polite Scottish intellectuals developed distinctively Scottish preoccupations. Some looked anxiously backwards to a Scottish past that seemed in danger of becoming forgotten and wrote lengthy treatises to remind themselves of the antiquity of the Scottish nation, of the valour of its soldiers and of the vigour of its learned men. More confident modern-minded patriots like Allan Ramsay were anxious to rediscover the forgotten glories of the Scottish verse of the renaissance and of a vernacular culture that seemed to be in danger of disappearing and to refurbish it according to the correct taste of a polite world. The philosophically and theologically minded, their intellects sharpened by the teaching of Francis Hutcheson at Glasgow, explored the structure and working of the moral sense and, more dangerously, the sceptical marshes of Berkeleyan metaphysics – an important point to which I shall return later.

Ideologically these clubs were to the intellectuals much as the Honourable the Society for Improvement in the Knowledge of Agriculture was to the aristocrats. In both cases, members saw themselves as members of modern-minded elites, the one civilised by the pursuit of literature, philosophy and science, and the other by the pursuit of agricultural improvement. In both cases it was believed that these pursuits would lead to the improvement of society at large. For intellectuals and aristocrats both believed, in a way that was becoming commonplace in the west that the economic, social and cultural fortunes of society were interconnected and that improvement in one area would accompany and reinforce improvement in others. In this way society would progress as a totality from a state of rudeness to that state of refinement which they believed all modern-minded societies had it in their power to attain.

What social function did such cultural activity serve in a city whose life was dominated by an aristocratic provincial elite? Here I want to make only two very simple and obvious remarks. In the first place, if we are to judge from the behaviour of the most prominent of the early literati such as the poet Allan Ramsay, and the mathematician Colin McLaurin, and, from general contemporary comment, the literati set out to reinforce and encourage the improving zeal of the provincial elite they regarded as the natural leaders of society. University reformers had set out quite deliberately to supply the nobility and gentry with the sort of polite education they had hitherto only been able to obtain in Holland. Again, in 1737, Colin McLaurin went to considerable trouble to encourage his medical colleagues in the University to encourage not only medical research, but research into the sciences in general and even into antiquities, not simply to secure aristocratic patronage, but aristocratic participation in the pursuit of polite knowledge.13 And Allan Ramsay, who was generally regarded as the poet laureate to polite society, devoted much time to the composition of large quantities of exhortatory verse to encourage improvement of which the following, addressed to the Society for the Improvement in the Knowledge of Agriculture, is a typical example:

Continuous Best of Clubs Long to Improve
Your native plains and gain your nation's Love
Rouze every lazy Laird of each wide field
That unman'd not half their Product yield.14

My second point concerns the most obvious ideological attribute of polite culture – the faith that polite society had in the creative value of collective action in stimulating social progress. No-one doubted for a moment that by the selection and emulation of suitably progressive models, and by mutual self-education, the natural leaders of society could turn themselves into a modern-minded elite whose collective efforts could bring about the improvement of society. Such an ideology ultimately rested on a fairly optimistic view of free will. To be sure, polite society knew

enough about Locke to realise that the individual depended upon his perceptions of the external world for his knowledge of it, for his values and for his knowledge of the God he worshipped and that he was in some sense a psychologically determined agent. Nevertheless, polite society also assumed, with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, that in addition to possessing the five traditional senses of sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell, man had a moral sense which allowed him to choose virtue and to eschew vice, to show public spirit or to relapse into selfishness. He thought of the happy man as one who understood the workings of human nature and recognised the limits in which he was free to act. And he took it for granted that such purposeful actions would play a decisive part in increasing virtue and personal happiness and the happiness of society at large.

But say you doubted whether the individual himself was simply a bundle of perceptions, made coherent by a process of association and habit over which his reason and will had little or no control. Did that not threaten the idea of the individual as a free agent or even of the individual as an entity with an objective personal identity? Say you went further and suggested that the structure of society and the course of social progress was determined by mechanisms of which we have little knowledge and over which we have little control? Did such doubt not strike at the ideological heart of polite culture with its optimistic faith in the improvableability of man and his environment? In contemporary philosophical terms, these sort of questions were discussed by the followers of Bishop Berkeley (if not always by the Bishop himself). Edinburgh had a circle of Berkeleians who formed the Rankenian Club, a little society which was founded in 1716, flourished until 1746 and survived until 1774. It was an exceptionally vigorous club, by all accounts and was in contact with Berkeley himself, whose doctrines they were said to have pushed "to amazing lengths"; and although the young David Hume was not a member, he knew most of its members. As George Davie has observed, it was the Rankenians who brought him into contact with the world of contemporary metaphysics.17

Although intellectuals and some ministers and college students found plenty to intrigue them in Berkelian determinism their discussions do not seem to have aroused much interest in wider aristocratic circles. This is not surprising. It is easier and more sensible to ignore ungenial philosophy or to laugh at what seem to be the self-evident absurdities of philosophers than to attack them. Philosophers are worth attacking only if it is believed that what they write (whether or not it is understood) constitutes a threat to good order and good morals. That situation is only likely to arise when a philosopher and his writing is treated with respect by powerful social interests. In this early period Berkelian determinism can be regarded as a deviation from the received ideological norms of polite culture in a city which was a perfectly conventional example of a provincial capital with a lively but fairly conventional cultural life. What is interesting is that determinism suddenly emerged as the ideological norm of polite culture between 1750 and 1780. We must see how this came about and try to discover why it did so.

III

By the 1740s the first important evidence of the economic progress that the Scots had hoped for, would be seen. Not only were there signs of commercial expansion but rent-rolls were beginning to rise significantly. As far as landed society was concerned, it meant that the poverty which had confined their expectations to Scotland and to Edinburgh was now on the wane. Young men, raised in the polite culture of the 1720s - 40s were now feeling the liberating effects of long-promised wealth for the first time. By the 1750s this new generation was becoming prominent in Edinburgh society and to their normal Edinburgh season they began to add the sort of periodic visits to London that James Boswell and his friends loved to make. By the 1770s and 80s street directories make it clear that they and their sons were

15. McElroy, Scotland's Age of Improvement, pp. 22-23.
beginning to give up the Edinburgh season altogether, leaving the
direction of its social life in the hands of a professional bourgeois
and petty gentry. As far as the minor nobility and substantial
gentry were concerned, by Walter Scott and Francis Jeffrey's day,
Edinburgh was what Lady Sinclair of Duntrach brought out "An inn or
a halfway house between London and Highland moors." 118

Changing expectations inevitably raised ideological problems.
The long campaign to stimulate economic growth seemed at last to
be bearing fruit and it was natural that this new generation should
want to see themselves as the legitimate heirs of their fathers, the
rightful guardians of their country's liberties and agents of its
improvement. The difference was that while their fathers had
necessarily confined their expectations to life in their impove-
rished province, they could look forward to a more expansive
London-oriented life of the sort that English noblemen and
substantial country gentlemen led. In other words they needed an
ideological formula which would identify them as a legitimate
governing elite but which would not identify their fortunes with
their country as closely as that of their fathers. Their fathers had
articulated their collective identity in an institution with para-
parliamentary characteristics. Their sons however did not revive
this institution when it became defunct in 1746 or found an
alternative to it; instead they became parasites upon the little club
of intellectuals called the Select Society. To put it metaphorically,
while the fathers had built an ideological house in the city, the
sons merely chose to rent ideological rooms in a house which did
not belong to them.

The Select Society began life in May 1754 as a club of
fourteen of the younger literati led by David Hume, Adam Smith
and the painter Allan Ramsay (the poet's son). 119 Like the younger
aristocrats these men had been raised in the polite culture of the
1720s – 40s. They met, so it seems to discuss the sort of
sociological and aesthetic problems on which Hume had written
and on which the others were soon to publish. In so doing, they
believed, in the conventional way, that they would promote their
own improvement and that of their country. In other words, it
seems clear that they expected the Select Society to be to them
what the Rankenian Club had been to an earlier generation, the
institution which gathered together the more deterministically
minded men of their generation. However, no sooner had the club
come to life than it was bombarded with applications for
membership from the young aristocrats of Edinburgh and soon,
not without some misgivings on the part of its original members,
the society had acquired a highly aristocratic membership of 135
and there could have been many more. As Hume reported to Allan
Ramsay, in the spring of 1755,

It has grown to be a national concern. Young and old, noble
and ignoble, witty and dull, laity and clergy, all the world are
ambitious of a place among us, and on each occasion we are
as much solicited by candidates as if we were to choose a
Member of Parliament. 20

The Society's social structure is fascinating. By the end of
1754, the average age of its members was 32 and well over half
were closely connected by ties of kinship and marriage. A majority
were heirs soon to come into estates and over three-quarters were
men who were well on the road to careers which would take them
into significant and active offices in national and local govern-
ment, in the military, naval and ecclesiastical establishments. As
Mr. R. L. Emerson has put it, "Their roles were conditioned by
the expectation of inheriting titles, places, responsibilities, wealth
and power - the verystuff that human confidence is made of." 21
At first, under the aegis of the literati, they discussed the type of
institutions, economy manners and culture proper to a progressive
society, the relations between different stages of society and the
mechanisms which caused them to progress from one stage to
another. More particularly, they discussed local problems relating
to economic improvement legal and political reform. Soon their
activities became more practical and they resolved to sponsor a

19. McElroy, Scotland's Age of Improvement, pp. 48-67. See also M. Mosnet
programme of economic and social improvement which closely resembled that which their fathers had undertaken a generation before which was itself derived from the programme of the governing elite before the union. As their prospectus observed:

To encourage genius, to reward industry to cultivate the arts of peace are objects deserving the attention of public spirited persons.22

The situation which had developed was paradoxical and significant. While Edinburgh was an aristocratic city, the focal point of its social life was a society run by the literati. Between the 1720s and 1740s, the function of the literati had been to encourage the improving energies of the natural leaders of society. By the mid-1750s the literati were providing them with the institutional means of articulating their identity as a governing elite; they had become the guardians of the virtù of an aristocratic society. Naturally this gave the literati remarkably high status. The novelist Henry Mackenzie later recalled that “men of fashion were proud of their connection and acquaintance with men of letters.”23 The banker Sir William Forbes observed that “The circle of society in which (David Hume) moved in Edinburgh was not only extensive but the most distinguished for rank and fashion and literary merit of which Scotland could boast.”24 And Hume, along with Lord Kames and Lord Elibank, found themselves exercising what contemporaries saw as a complete dictatorship over the literary life of the city.

Ideologically the situation which had arisen was very curious. The high social status of Hume and his friends necessarily meant that their writing acquired a social significance it would have otherwise never enjoyed. The godly thought that this involved legitimising religious scepticism and in many respects they were right. However a much more important consequence was the legitimisation of a highly determinist view of man and society.


This is not the place to discuss the well-known psychological and sociological determinism of Hume and Adam Smith, or the less well-known but equally significant determinism of the neoclassical dramatist John Home or the sentimental novelist Henry Mackenzie — arguably the most conspicuous and influential members of Edinburgh’s polite society between 1750 and 1780. Let me simply stress the emphasis Hume and Smith gave to man as an agent who is, psychologically and sociologically deeply determined, whose purposive actions have little creative value in a world which functions according to mechanisms which he has little capacity to control. The determinism of John Home and Mackenzie derived from classical tragedy as much as from contemporary psychology and sociology. Each had a Sophoclean realisation that self-knowledge can only lead us to see that the world in which we act is one which we may understand, but in which we can never be free. The trouble was that such a view of human action necessarily posited that improvement does not and cannot result from the sort of organized pursuit of progress that aristocratic society had undertaken in the 1720-40s or that which their successors wanted the deterministically orientated leaders of the Select Society to patronise. In other words the aristocratic members of the Select Society seemed to want simultaneously to identify themselves with the ideology of their fathers and to adopt one which would undermine it.

Given the first signs of real economic growth in the 1750s and the ideological importance the Scottish landed classes had for so long attached to the attainment of such a goal, it was scarcely surprising that young aristocrats should have wanted to identify themselves as the traditional ideology of the Scottish governing elite. But the prospect of wealth also promised to open up the expensive high road to England to members of their class for the first time and threatened to arouse a guilty sense that they were betraying the patriotism and virtue which had inspired their ancestors to pursue the course of improvement. Thus it was not surprising that the Select Society frequently debated such subjects as this: “whether a nation may subsist without public spirit”; “whether commercial and military spirit can subsist in the same nation”; “can a body politic be virtuous” etc. What was reassuring
about the determinism of the literati was that it reassured them that the liberties and future welfare of their country lay not in their care but in that of the Invisible Hand.

It is axiomatic that attacks on free will and thus on personal identity are capable of arousing deep anxiety and if one can understand why aristocrats patronised a determinist brand of polite culture and in so doing, gave it and its practitioners considerable social importance, we must remember that not every Edinburgh citizen was an aristocrat with swelling rent-rolls. The gradual alienation of landed society from the city exposed the fact that there were many lawyers, doctors, ministers, professors, bankers, merchants and petty gentry whose lives and expectations had always been as firmly rooted in the city as those of the aristocrats of an earlier generation. Moreover, as I have indicated, these largely bourgeois interests would soon dominate the social life of the city. An emerging social elite of this sort could hardly be expected to look with favour on an ideology which denied them any real creative role in governing and improving their country. However, as civilized and intelligent men, anxious to seek legitimisation as the heirs to a successful aristocratic elite, they could scarcely derive much ideological comfort from the vulgar clerical bigotry that tried to defeat polite determinism by sheer abuse, by calling Hume and his friends “the imp’s of hell” and the aristocrats “the idle, loose, useless catties, falsely called nobility and gentry, and especially those called judges and lawyers.”

What this rising bourgeois oligarchy needed was an ideology of their own, a new variant of the polite culture of 1720–40 which Hume and his friends had undermined, which would affirm, once again, the creative value of the collective leadership of a governing elite. The course that much of Scottish culture took in the second half of the eighteenth century was determined by the anxiety which many intellectuals and members of this newly-emerging elite felt with a culture, associated with Hume and his circle,

which, through force of historical circumstance had acquired a social and ideological importance of disturbing proportions. It was their need to allay these anxieties by discovering satisfying ways of coping with polite determinism which provided intellectually-minded Scots with a powerful impetus to creative thinking.

In time I hope I shall be able to trace the ways in which this crisis worked itself out in the fields of metaphysics, sociology, history, literature and even physiology. I hope that I shall be able to show that the ideological common denominator to the reaction to polite determinism in each of these fields was a defensive concern on the part of philosophers, scientists and men of letters with the problem of showing that man was a free agent and a creative being, capable of shaping his own environment according to his needs, in spite of the powerful determinist forces which threatened to overwhelm him. Here I would simply like to indicate, very briefly, how I think that this reaction affected two important areas of learning, the social sciences and metaphysics.

Adam Ferguson was deeply disturbed by Smithian determinism. Were all men’s actions really directed towards assimilating himself passively to the dominant value system of those around him as Smith had so brilliantly argued in the Theory of Moral Sentiments? Had man no active principle to prevent him from becoming thus enslaved? Ferguson thought that he had. Man acquired his livelihood and humanity from a restless pursuit of a perfection he could never define. It was a pursuit which involved him in competition with nature, with his fellow men and with himself, which, once relaxed, would leave him prisoner of the passive, comfortable, prudential values he most feared. No doubt, said Ferguson in one of his most interesting moments, Hume and Smith were right to think political activity seldom achieved anything you could define in utilitarian terms. But all societies and tribes love politics and do so because its quarrels and its struggles help them to preserve that tribal sense of identity which is daily threatened by the division of labour and the progress of luxury.

For John Millar, Smith’s most accomplished pupil, the problem...
was rather different. Millar understood Smith's sociology as well as anyone and he understood how small a part chance, foresight and the activities of great men played in determining the course of social progress. But he was a political animal and a Foxite whig at that. As such, it was difficult for him to find comfort in a sociology that denied creative power to the reforming politician. As one of his pupils, Francis Jeffrey noticed, Millar was ultimately unable to reconcile the demands of sociology and politics. His justly celebrated attempt to treat the history of England sociologically, the *Historical View of the English Government* is broken-backed: its early chapters are more a study of feudal society in general than that of England and its later chapters are brilliant: political pamphlets.  

But the work as a whole is an extraordinary fitting monument to the ideological tensions built into the culture of the Scottish enlightenment.

The second and historically most important reaction to polite determinism came from the Common Sense philosophers, Thomas Reid, James Beattie and Dugald Stewart. The Common Sense reaction to determinist polite culture came from Aberdeen University and the Aberdeen Philosophical Society which was founded in 1758. This, in itself, is significant as Aberdeen was the centre of the “non-conformist” north-east. It was a city strongly associated with episcopalianism and Jacobitism rather than the presbyterianism and whiggery of Edinburgh and lowland Scotland. Traditionally difficult to govern, with a distinctive cultural tradition, the Common Sense reaction to polite determinism of Edinburgh can be seen as the reaction of the province to the capital. Philosophically this reaction took the form of a deliberate, conscious attempt to combat Hume's determinism and, by extension, to question the value of the sort of anthropological and historical evidence upon which his theory of human nature ultimately rested. Resting upon the proposition that those truths which our common sense makes known to us are necessarily true, Reid could bypass Hume and Smith's devastating critique of free will by asserting that if we know our will to be free and if this belief is shared equally by every living person then it is so and all

reductionist attempts to explain it away are perversions of science. In the same way the objective existence of the external world, the necessary existence of God, the existence of personal identity could all be postulated as axiomatic.  

This critique, coupled with a sophisticated, even penetrating, examination of the mechanics of perception and association and a deep respect for the creative possibilities of science properly conducted, provided the intellectual foundations for a new variant of polite provincial culture which quickly took root in Scotland. By the 1780s Common Sense philosophy had taken over the philosophy schools in Edinburgh and all the other Scottish universities. In 1764 Reid moved the chair of moral philosophy at Glasgow in succession to Adam Smith (to Smith’s evident annoyance) and while Beattie refused the moral philosophy chair at Edinburgh in 1773, Reid's best pupil, Dugald Stewart was to occupy it in 1785. Soon it was to underpin the critical style of that most influential of all nineteenth century journals, the *Edinburgh Review*.  

It was the cultural triumph of provincial Aberdeen over metropolitan Edinburgh. Outside Scotland, Common Sense philosophy spread to restoration France and, most strikingly to revolutionary and post-revolutionary America where it was the philosophy of Common Sense and not the determinist polite culture of Hume and his circle that was to work its way into the college curricula and into the cultural life of New England elite immediately before the Revolution and for nearly a century after it. Perhaps common sense philosophy attracted Americans


21. This point was first noticed by Philaret Chasles in *Revue Contemporaine*, 1855, p. 87.


for the same reason that it attracted the newly emerging bourgeois
and petty-gentry elite of Edinburgh in the second half of the
eighteenth century. Perhaps they, too, could find in it a means of
legitimising their role as members of an elite composed of sensible,
modern-minded, God-fearing men of affairs, who dealt in the
realities of ordinary life and in the day to day business of running
the society of which they were the natural and legitimate leaders.
Scottish common sense philosophy traded in such needs just as
much as the provincial culture of the early eighteenth century had
done and offered an extraordinarily durable variant of polite
culture which was ideologically able to withstand a psychological
determinism which was, as James Beattie put it,

The bane of true learning, true taste and true sense; [It is] to
it we owe all this modern scepticism and atheism; [It] has a
bad effect upon the human faculties and tends not a little to
sour the temper, to subvert good principles, and to disqualify
men for the business of life.  

In this paper I have tried to explain why Edinburgh, of all the
various centres of western provincial culture, should have develop-
ed a cultural life of such richness in the eighteenth century and
why it should have been at its richest between the 1750s and 80s.
My explanation has placed great weight on the social effects of the
Anglo-Scottish union on one particular section of the Scottish
landed class and upon those ideological needs it called upon a
literati to satisfy. And I have suggested that the ideological
purchase which some purely intellectual problems received in the
process gave those problems a capacity to arouse anxiety and
stimulated men to seek to ally it in particular ways. This, I have
suggested, is the hall-mark of the Scottish enlightenment and it is
the function of a historical situation that was peculiar to
eighteenth-century Edinburgh.

But the interest of explanatory models lies as much in what
they do not explain as in what they do. And while I think I can
explain a preoccupation with determinism in the 1750s, I cannot
explain the precise form of the cultural debate which took place in
Edinburgh. No doubt the infertile condition of Scottish presby-
terianism ruled out the possibility that the debate would be cast in
theological form and that a Scottish Jonathan Edwards would
emerge to dominate the country’s ideological and cultural life. No
doubt the state of professional philosophy and literature dictated
that intellectual parameters of the debate would be fixed by
Berkelian metaphysics, moral sense philosophy, the thought of
Montesquieu, and by the conventions of classical tragedy. But the
most striking characteristic of Edinburgh’s cultural life in the
1750s is its sense of urgency and the sense that intellectual inquiry
was socially vitally important. That was due, quite simply to the
genius of Adam Smith and above all, David Hume. Their analytical
brilliance, their rhetorical force and clarity, their ruthless intel-
lectual honesty, made it exceptionally difficult for intellectuals,
working in a civilised environment, to produce satisfying means of
allaying the anxieties which a deterministic ideology aroused.
Given the social importance of polite determinism this was a
situation designed to call forth powerful reserves of ambitious,
creative energy. The intellectual power of Scotland’s determinists
set in a distinctive and complex social environment was the trigger
which detonated those social and cultural forces which turned
Edinburgh into the Athens of Britain.

Nicholas Phillipson

32. Forbes, Life of Beattie  •  171