

Chapter 2

The Scottish Enlightenment

Scotland's outstanding achievement in philosophy, particularly during the period of the Scottish Enlightenment towards the end of the eighteenth century, is one of the great intellectual contributions to world culture. Much of modern philosophy originated in the works of Scottish thinkers of that time, which influenced the whole of the English-speaking world as well as enlightened philosophical movements in Germany and France. Before the eighteenth century was over, Scotland had generated the basic institutions, ideas, attitudes and habits of mind that characterise the modern age, opening a new era in human history.

The very notion of 'human history' itself was largely a Scottish conception. Scots were the first to link history and human nature and present man as a product of history and political environment. In arguing that the study of man is ultimately a scientific one, Scottish philosophers created what are known as the social sciences today: anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology, history and economics. Their interest in improving society through an understanding of human nature made an important contribution to contemporary world attitudes towards democracy, freedom and human rights. This age of philosophy is not just an episode in Scottish history: it marks a crucial turning point in the development of the western world.

A hotbed of genius... Edinburgh takes the lead

Edinburgh remained intellectually active throughout the whole period of the enlightenment and attracted talent as the cultural capital of Scotland.



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Intellectual clubs and societies thrived in Edinburgh, drawing together men with literary and philosophical tastes from all walks of life to exchange ideas and opinions.

Many of Edinburgh's most important intellectual movements began with gatherings in taverns: the Tuesday Club, the Poker Club, the Oyster Club, and the Rankenian Club. The Select Society was the most important Club, welcoming members such as David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and Lord Kames. For ten years it was the central forum of Edinburgh's 'republic of letters'.

Famously called a 'hotbed of genius', Edinburgh's close-knit community of scholars and thinkers was unique and attracted outsiders such as Adam Smith, Benjamin Franklin and Robert Burns. Only London and Paris could compete with Edinburgh as an intellectual centre, but Edinburgh stood out as a city where intellect rather than social rank mattered: a place where a farmer like Robert Burns could be embraced as a member of the literati.

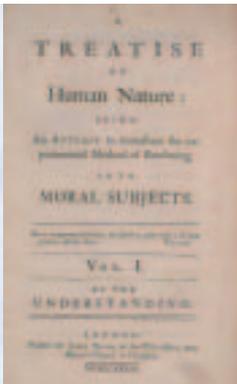
The literature produced by Scots, and especially Edinburgh writers, exceeded in quality and quantity what could have been expected from such a small country. The works of the Scots were reviewed in the major European philosophical journals as soon as they appeared and were soon translated into other languages. In this way Scottish thought was quickly given a wide audience in Europe, and was assimilated by German philosophers in particular.

1. Robert Burns, associated with Enlightenment figures
2. David Hume, one of the key members of the Select Society
3. Lord Kames, leading Enlightenment figure
4. Adam Ferguson, also a member of the Select Society
5. Adam Smith, another famous participant of the Select Society meetings



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1. German translation of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume
2. David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in English
3. Salisbury Crags, inspiration for James Hutton's theories



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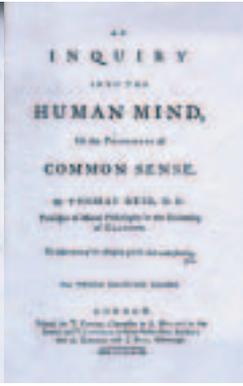
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The thirst for understanding

The first steps in world-changing thought were taken by Adam Smith (1723 - 1790) in his pioneering economics work. Yet it was his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that made him truly famous – held to be as important as Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* in the field of psychology.

David Hume (1711-1776) is remembered as modernity's first great philosopher. For more than 2,000 years Western philosophers had praised the primacy of reason as the guide to all human emotion and virtue. Hume reversed this with his book *A Treatise of Human Nature*, writing that 'reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions'. Hume tried to banish religion from the discussion of moral and social conduct. However, this provoked a large opposition – the Scottish Common Sense movement, led by Thomas Reid. He was a moderate clergyman from Aberdeen who refuted that common sense overcame reason. Reid's impact in America was huge; Thomas Jefferson borrowed Reid's idea of 'self-evident truths' for the US Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson was also influenced by Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), who saw the ultimate goal of liberty as happiness, prompting him to add 'the pursuit of happiness' to his list of the inalienable rights of man. Hutcheson's writings challenged all forms of oppression and inspired anti-slavery abolitionists throughout the UK and USA. Together with the work of Hutcheson, it was those of Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696-1782) that revolutionised the Scots intellect.



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Kames organised the history of human community into four distinct stages and showed how each environment forces changes in the way people think, act and govern their lives. William Robertson (1721-1793) later used Kames' four-stage theory in creating the study of modern history.

Moving people... moving the earth

Reid's greatest pupil, Dugald Stewart (1753-1828) developed Reid's Common Sense Philosophy; in merging Adam Smith's moral realism with Reid's common sense, he creating the principles of political science. Through Dugald Stewart, Scottish philosophy touched almost every aspect of public life in Britain, as well as extending across the English-speaking world and colonies. By the 1790s its principles were being taught in every Scottish university, were gaining favour in America and France and profoundly influenced the intellectual environment of Immanuel Kant in Germany.

The roots of another school of thought altogether were also borne out of Scotland. Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) studied in Edinburgh for the clergy. His *Essay on the History of Civil Society* contained one of the first uses of the word 'civilisation' in English, coining the term 'civil society' as synonymous with modernity. Marxism owes its greatest debt to Ferguson as the most trenchant critic of capitalism.

Whereas Stewart and Ferguson looked at the progress of man, James Hutton (1726-1797) looked at the progress of the earth. His study of the rocks and mountains around Edinburgh led him to a new understanding of the science of geology.

- 4. Portrait of Dugald Stewart, Thomas Reid's greatest pupil
- 5. Swedish translation of Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*
- 6. Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind*
- 7. Swedish translation of William Robertson's *History of America*
- 8. William Robertson, historian



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1. Thomas Carlyle, by John Linnell
2. Title page from *Blackwood's Magazine* 1882 edition
3. John Wilson, who wrote under the literary disguise of 'Christopher North'
4. Robert Burns, whose *A Man's a Man for A' That* encapsulated enlightened notions
5. Henry Mackenzie, whose *The Man of Feeling* was a book Burns 'prized next to the Bible'

His *Theory of the Earth* concluded that the Earth's crust was made up of the debris of past geological upheavals and was much older than the Bible suggested. He set the stage for the study of evolution, embraced by his contemporary Erasmus Darwin, and later by his grandson, Charles Darwin – also an Edinburgh student – in his seminal work *On the Origin of Species*.

Enlightened writing and literature

Against this background of development and continuing enlightenment, Edinburgh's literary community was inspired to comment and contribute through writing. *Blackwood's Magazine* was home to John Wilson (1785-1854), who under the literary disguise of 'Christopher North' wrote fearsome and witty reviews and commentaries on prominent figures of the day. After his death in 1854, literary Scotland was a notably quieter place.

Another critic, historian and essayist of the Enlightenment was Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), whose writings offer a valuable insight into this period. One of his most influential pieces was *Heroes and Hero Worship* in which he identified the need for heroes to lead a society that had lost its way. Carlyle's effect on writers of his time was extraordinary: many Victorian novels bear the imprint of his analysis, including the works of Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot and Disraeli in the UK and European writers, Proust, Baudelaire and Froding. In seeking to express the new philosophy of the Enlightenment, great literature emerged.

ENCYCLOPÆDIA
BRITANNICA



THE
M A N
OF
FEELING.

A NEW EDITION

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR W. JOHNSON, AND
T. BARNARD, IN THE STRAND,
1789.



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Much of the poetry of Robert Burns encapsulated enlightened notions of the time: for instance the democratic principles of *A Man's A Man for A' That*. Burns himself commented that Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* was 'a book I prize next to the bible'. The carefully defined sentimentalism encouraged by the Enlightenment was reflected throughout the novel in the sensitivity of the hero, Hartley.

The Scots' thirst for understanding produced the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in Edinburgh in 1768. The world's leading reference source still displays its thistle emblem today.

Enlightened times... enlightened visitors

Among the many international visitors to Edinburgh during the Enlightenment was Benjamin Franklin, who was honoured with the freedom of the city during his first visit in 1759. Many American visitors followed Franklin, and around 100 students came to the University of Edinburgh in the years leading up to the American Revolution.

A later visitor was the American ornithologist John James Audubon, who came to Britain in 1826 seeking an engraver capable of reproducing the paintings for his book *The Birds of America*. It was in Edinburgh that he found the necessary encouragement and facilities to realise his ambitions, meeting William Home Lizars, the engraver who demonstrated the feasibility of printing and publishing the large paintings, and William MacGillivray, conservator at the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, who assisted Audubon in writing the *Ornithological Bibliography*.

6. The famous thistle emblem of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

7. *The Man of Feeling*, by Henry Mackenzie

8. Detail from an illustration from *The Birds of America*, by John James Audubon, who sought expertise in Edinburgh for his book

Overleaf:

David Hume writes at his desk.

Engraving by Louis Carrogis

