ALEXANDER BROADIE

Introduction

The Scottish Enlightenment, a remarkable intellectual flourish that lasted for much of the eighteenth century, was an event of great importance for western culture. During it scientific, economic, philosophical and other advances were made which had an immediate impact in Europe, America and beyond, and the impact is still felt. The seminal writings of the time are discussed by scholars who return to them in search of insights that can then be put to work in ongoing debates. Hence, though there is an antiquarian interest in the Scottish Enlightenment, interest in it is by no means solely antiquarian, as witness the numerous references we find to Hume, Smith, Reid and other Enlightenment thinkers in present-day discussions of contemporary issues. In this book the historical circumstances of the Scottish Enlightenment will be described; and thereafter attention is focused on the leading ideas, without however losing sight of the fact that the Scottish Enlightenment is a historical event located in a set of historical circumstances that were essential to the movement's birth and growth. Attention is also focused on the highly social nature of the movement. The writers were held together by bonds of friendship; they argued and debated with each other, and created many clubs and societies designed to facilitate discussion. This aspect of the Scottish Enlightenment is a crucial feature of it, and will be duly noted in the following pages. But these historical and social considerations would hardly hold our attention if it were not for the brilliant ideas that were the products of all this high-level clubbing. In the end, it is because of what they said, not because of whom they talked to, that Hume, Smith, Millar, Black, Hutton and others matter to us. And since the Scottish Enlightenment is

essentially about ideas this book is in large measure an investigation of those ideas.

The authors in question are numerous. Among the leading protagonists of the Scottish Enlightenment were Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Henry Home (Lord Kames), Dugald Stewart, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, William Robertson, Hugh Blair, Colin Maclaurin, James Watt, Joseph Black and James Hutton. Among the fields to which major contributions were made are philosophy, natural theology, economics, social science, law, historiography, linguistics, mathematics, chemistry, engineering and geology. Although this might seem a very disparate set of fields, within the Scottish Enlightenment the unity of the set was emphasised, and the principle of unity was itself a matter of philosophical discussion. In this volume the range of fields is on display, and attention is also given to the unity of the overall movement.

Nevertheless the very existence of the Scottish Enlightenment has been questioned, and even among those who do not question its reality there has been considerable dispute about its nature. Its existence has been disputed on the grounds that the Enlightenment was an international movement with a distinctly international character, and that in the countries which participated in the movement the Enlightenment did not take on a national character, from which it would follow that though Scots participated they did not do so in such a way as to produce a distinctly Scottish Enlightenment. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment in Scotland was distinctively Scottish, and this is surely to be expected if the matter is considered in terms of the large structures that define us. A Scot writing on politics, economics, social structures, education, law or religion will think in terms of the politics, economics, society, education, law or religious dimension of his country, and it is impossible for his thought not to be affected by these distinctive features of his national context. The point is not that the Scottish models contribute irresistibly to the agenda from which Scottish thinkers work, though those models surely will be on their agenda. It is rather that the thinkers write as Scots, who have therefore lived in, worked with, and in large measure been formed by those institutions. Since there is demonstrably something distinctively Scottish about the large institutions – the Kirk, the legal system and the universities – which inform the experience that supports and motivates the thinkers'

reflections, there will also be something distinctively Scottish about those reflections upon the concepts which the institutions embody, and upon the values of the institutions. The Scottish dimension of the reflections is particularly to be expected in view of the fact that most of the major figures of the Scottish Enlightenment were leading actors within the great institutions – they were professors, lawyers or preachers, and so were naturally likely to reflect deeply on the institutions they were helping by their activities to sustain.

The answer to the second of the two questions mentioned earlier, that concerning the nature of the Scottish Enlightenment, is of practical importance for this book. For of course the answer must affect the contents, both as regards which fields are to be included and as regards the relative weight that should be assigned to each of them. Something must therefore be said about this matter. The term 'Scottish Enlightenment' was coined in 1900 by William Robert Scott, who spoke of Francis Hutcheson as 'the prototype of the Scottish Enlightenment, that is, the diffusion of philosophic ideas in Scotland and the encouragement of speculative tastes among the men of culture of the generation following his own'.[1] But though Scott's coinage is in common use his account of it has been supplanted. Among the many alternative accounts three in particular have real strength. They may, perhaps tendentiously, be labelled the political economic, the scientific and the inclusive. This ordering is due to the order in which the classic statement of each position was first put into the public domain. The earliest of these was by Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre), who defined the Scottish Enlightenment in terms of 'the social mechanism of progress', and subsequently, and apparently without changing his position, defined it in terms of the development of the discipline of political economy.[2] In this he has been followed by John Robertson, who has however taken the analysis further, arguing that the three central disciplines of the Scottish Enlightenment are moral philosophy, historiography and political economy, and that the most important of these for the Scottish Enlightenment's grand project of the analysis and advocacy of progress in society is political economy.[3] In this book several of the chapters, most conspicuously those by Luigi Turco, Murray Pittock and Andrew Skinner, focus upon the fields that Trevor-Roper and John Robertson have identified as central, while other chapters, by Christopher Berry, Aaron Garrett and Fania Oz-Salzberger, have

focused on social scientific fields closely cognate with those highlighted by Trevor-Roper and Robertson.

But there is reason to pause before assenting to the view of Trevor-Roper and Robertson. For if what is truly important about the analysis and advocacy of progress in society is that such activities might actually lead to such progress, then it is arguable that science is crucially important to the Scottish Enlightenment, perhaps more important than were moral philosophy, historiography and political economy. It is not merely that the hugely successful scientific enterprise of the Scottish Enlightenment, led by thinkers and doers such as William Cullen, James Watt and Joseph Black, was driven by the perceived need to better the material conditions of the country (which at the beginning of the eighteenth century were in desperate need of improvement), but that scientific ways of thinking – the deployment of scientific methodology and scientific concepts and categories – were at work across the whole range of intellectual disciplines. Science was even deployed, on all sides, in debates on the existence and nature of God. This view concerning the scientific nature of the Scottish Enlightenment is represented in this book in several chapters, especially those by Roger Emerson and Paul Wood, while other chapters, such as those by M. A. Stewart and A. Broadie, emphasise the centrality of science in debates in seemingly non-scientific fields.

These two positions, privileging in the first case the social sciences and in the second case the natural sciences (such as physics, chemistry, medicine and botany), seem mutually incompatible though each is supported by substantive arguments. A third way, seeking to rescue the valuable insights of each position, has been developed. It seeks inclusivity by focusing on the culture of the enlightened ones of Scotland, the so-called 'literati', those 'Scottish men of letters who placed a high premium on polite learning as well as on humane and humanitarian values, such as cosmopolitanism, religious toleration, sociable conviviality, and moral and economic improvement'.[4] Richard Sher, who formulated this cultural definition,[5] sees as one of its chief virtues the fact that it accommodates the insight that science and medicine were activities integral to the Scottish Enlightenment, while at the same time not privileging those activities at the expense of the no less integral investigations into ethics, history and political economy.

I have reported these three hard-defended positions not in order to adjudicate, but because it is necessary to justify the range of topics covered in this book. I have chosen to be inclusive because one feature of the debates conducted in eighteenth-century Scotland is the fact that they were conducted by thinkers who were, each of them, able to draw on a wide range of disciplines and who did in fact use their wide-ranging knowledge in the course of developing their positions, and attacking alternatives. For example, philosophers working on questions regarding both the means by which we come to form beliefs and also the reliability of powers through which we acquire beliefs, commonly deployed ideas concerning scientific methodology, concepts in physics and even advanced mathematics. (Heiner Klemme's chapter gives some examples of this.) This illustrates the fact that although it is of course possible to distinguish different disciplines or fields investigated during the Scottish Enlightenment, no attempt was made in practice to keep the separate disciplines in their separate boxes. A holistic approach to intellectual problems was characteristic of the literati, and I believe that an account of the Scottish Enlightenment should take due account of the formidably wide range of intellectual disciplines which were enriched by the Scottish thinkers of the eighteenth century.

It is noteworthy that most of the leading contributors to the Scottish Enlightenment lived in the three university cities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, cities in which there was also a rich extra-academic life, thus giving the professors opportunities, grasped with enthusiasm, to exchange ideas with lively minded people who, as agents and not just as spectators, had well-informed insights into people and institutions. As one instance of this we might note Adam Smith, moral philosophy professor at Glasgow, who engaged often with the local merchants then trading across the world, and especially with America. Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was a product of many things, amongst which was Smith's close contact with the merchant class of Glasgow. Contact between town and gown was facilitated by the numerous societies and clubs, such as the Wise Club in Aberdeen, the Literary Society in Glasgow and the Select Society in Edinburgh.

Eighteenth-century Scotland was wide open to ideas from elsewhere. The Enlightenment was a Republic of Letters, a multinational company dealing in ideas, in which people put their ideas

into the public domain to be criticised and improved, or criticised and sunk. Within this market place Scotland contributed a great deal, and was also the beneficiary of ideas which it then took up and tranformed into something appropriate to the Scottish context, as happened, for example, in the case of Scots who took up ideas of Grotius and Pufendorf, and developed those same ideas in characteristic ways. Chapters hereafter by Knud Haakonssen and John Cairns make clear Scottish indebtedness in this area, as does Andrew Skinner's chapter in dealing with Adam Smith's relation to French thinkers, particularly the physiocrats. Scottish openness to ideas from elsewhere can be illustrated across the board, as can the Scottish contribution to debates in the international Republic of Letters – thus we find that David Hume and Adam Smith were two of the most influential members of the wider Enlightenment movement.

The diffusion of the Scottish Enlightenment is an important topic both because it indicates the importance of the movement for western culture and also because it enables us to explain the direction of progress in the many countries that were beneficiaries of this Scottish invisible export. The Scottish Enlightenment might be considered Scotland's chief export to America. From the early mid-eighteenth century, Scots educated by Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid and others voyaged to North America where they taught in and helped to run colleges which in due course became great universities. The students of these immigrants, as Samuel Fleischacker demonstrates in chapter sixteen, thus came to receive an education in the leading ideas of the major Scottish thinkers of the period, and the 'Scottish philosophy' became widely diffused through the American education system. And in Continental Europe the influence of the Scottish thinkers, especially those of the common sense school, was no less great, as Michel Malherbe shows.

There is disagreement on the question when the Scottish Enlightenment ended, but most answers place its conclusion in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Nevertheless the Scottish school of common sense philosophy flourished at least into the middle of the nineteenth century. Thereafter what happened is not so easily stated, largely because the philosophical scene in Scotland in the nineteenth century has hardly been documented. In the final chapter Gordon Graham traces the nineteenth-century story in

terms of what he sees as the unravelling of the great philosophical project that had animated the eighteenth century.

While philosophy is only one of the many fields discussed in this book, philosophy had a central place in the Scottish Enlightenment, informing debates in all areas, and its centrality is properly represented here in the fact that the perspective of the book is throughout a philosophical perspective broadly conceived.

NOTES

1 William Robert Scott, *Francis Hutcheson: his Life, Teaching and Position in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900), 265.
2 H. Trevor-Roper, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 58 (1967), 1635–58; Trevor-Roper, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', *Blackwood's Magazine* 322 (1977), 371–88.
3 John Robertson, 'The Scottish Contribution to the Enlightenment', in Paul Wood, ed., *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2000), 37–62.
4 Richard B. Sher, 'Science and Medicine in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Wood, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 104.
5 Ibid., 99–156; also Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: the Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 3–14, for an early implicit statement of the position.

ROGER EMERSON

1 The contexts of the Scottish Enlightenment

I

There is no single context for the Scottish Enlightenment but there are several which were important. Let us start with the most basic, Scotland's geography, which made Scots poor but which also endowed them with the means of improvement and posed questions which the enlightened studied and sought to answer.

Of Scotland's 30,000 square miles less than 10 per cent was arable land in the eighteenth century. Somewhat more was comprised of grazing land of varying quality (more or less 13 per cent) and perhaps 3 per cent made up forest which was cuttable; perhaps a bit more was usable in some fashion.[1] The possible uses of this land were determined by altitude, by the kinds of soils, and by the micro-climates, of which Scotland has many.[2] Scotland was and would remain a poor country. Agricultural improvement, to produce both more food and the materials for industries (such as wool), was a concern which was recognised in the seventeenth century and grew in importance throughout the eighteenth century.

Physical geography informed the country's prospects in other ways. Scotland has long coastlines and Scots were an ocean-going people, but the river systems they possessed were not as useful for inland navigation as were those in England or France because of the short distances to the fall lines. Scottish waterfalls might power industry along the Water of Leith near Edinburgh and at New Lanark, but they did not generally become the sources for power in the early industrial revolution since the fall lines were often not located near enough to raw materials or to population centres. The solution to these problems for the Scots was the steam engine, coal and better

transport, but these developments had to wait until the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Fully exploited, they would largely benefit people in the middle of the country, those in or near Glasgow and Edinburgh. While not determining Scottish prospects, geography limited improvements while focusing attention upon what Scots needed to know to best utilise and improve their resources for agriculture and industry. Scots became chemists in order that they might find better fertilisers, bleaches and dyes for their fabrics, and geologists as they sought to find their mineral wealth. At the same time, they had to consider the social and political-economic changes required for improvements.

The land and the resource base limited the population which the country could carry. Despite emigration, the population rose from about 1,100,000 in 1700 to 1,625,000 in 1801 (c. 50 per cent).[3] People were distributed around the edges of the country, along the river valleys and in low-lying fertile regions where the best lands lay. In 1700, somewhat over a third lived in the Highlands and Islands. By 1800 the percentage was much less. By 1765, although many Highlanders were still monolingual in Gaelic, about 75 per cent of the whole population spoke a Scots of some description.[4] Perhaps 50 per cent lived in the central part of the country with the rest in the Borders and outlying areas. Scotland was a culturally diverse land because of its geography.

The land carried more people in the eighteenth century than it had before partly because of declining standards of consumption, but also owing to increased efficiency in land use and to changes in the structure of markets.[5] Still, there was a precarious balance; Malthusian thinning occurred in the 1690s, perhaps in 1740 and was threatened in the 1780s. Demographic pressures on resources can be lessened by finding more resources, by using what exists more efficiently or with new technologies or by lowering the level of population. All four strategies characterised the Enlightenment period.

Scots had long moved around within their country and had travelled abroad to seek work, often as mercenary soldiers. Such migrants, all over Europe, usually came from the poorest areas – in Scotland, the Highlands and Borders. Skilled migrants tended to come from Lowland areas and from the towns, of which Scotland had a relatively large number.[6] Indeed, it was surprisingly urbanised[7] and the proportion of city dwellers grew rapidly in the eighteenth