Introduction

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The Scottish Enlightenment, a remarkable intellectual flourish that lasted for much of the eighteenth century, was an event of great significance 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 noted in the following pages. But these historical and social considerations would hold our attention a good deal less 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, aesthetics, 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.

All this notwithstanding, 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 may be 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. Scots 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 their country, and it is impossible for their thought not to be affected by these distinctive features of their 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, namely 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 that they were helping by their activities to sustain. To which it has to be added that these institutions, enfolding the enlightened ones

almost from cradle to grave, also informed the mode of reflection of the thinkers when they reflected on those very institutions, their values, objectives, structures and so on.

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 book's 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 more so in view of the fact that the concept of the Scottish Enlightenment itself is so heavily contested. The term 'Scottish Enlightenment' is in common use today through William Robert Scott, who in 1900 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 phrase is in common use, his account of it has been supplanted, or at least greatly qualified. Among the alternative accounts, three 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] John Robertson has taken Trevor-Roper's analysis further, arguing that the three central disciplines of the Scottish Enlightenment are political economy, moral philosophy and history, 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 Chapters 7, 13 and 9, focus upon the fields that Trevor-Roper and John Robertson have identified as central, while other chapters, including Chapters 12, 4 and 8, focus on social scientific fields closely cognate with those highlighted by Trevor-Roper and Robertson.

But there is reason to pause before assenting to this political economic account. For, as with any account concerning the nature of the Scottish Enlightenment, this one presupposes a position on the more general question of what it is that justifies use of the term 'enlightenment' in speaking about the Scottish Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant,

one of the greatest figures of the European Enlightenment, provides the best-known answer to the question, what is enlightenment? It is humankind's exit from our self-incurred inability to make use of our own understanding without the guidance of another, where that inability is a product of our lack of resolution and courage to use our understanding without guidance. Hence Kant's declaration that *Sapere aude*, 'Dare to know', or (in Kant's paraphrase) 'Have the courage to use your own understanding', is the motto of enlightenment.[4] This account sets no limit on the topics or disciplines about which one may be enlightened. The crucial thing is that you are not allowing another to do the thinking for you – you are doing it for yourself. This topic neutrality means that if Scotland were blessed with independent-minded thinkers working in mathematics, astronomy, physics or chemistry during the eighteenth century, then they would have a fair claim to being contributors to the Scottish Enlightenment. At least, their claim could not be dismissed out of hand on the grounds that they were not political economists, moral philosophers or historians. Quite the contrary, the mathematicians, political economists and so on would all fall under the same concept of 'enlightened'.

Indeed, they are arguably closer still, for if what is truly important about the analysis and advocacy of progress in society is that such analysis and advocacy might actually lead to progress in society, then science was as important to the Scottish Enlightenment as were moral philosophy, historiography and political economy, perhaps, indeed, more important than they. It is not merely that the hugely successful scientific enterprise during the Scottish Enlightenment, led by thinkers and doers such as William Cullen, James Watt, Joseph Black, John Robison and James Hutton, was in large measure driven by the perceived need to better the material conditions of the country (which at the beginning of the eighteenth century were in urgent 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. The investigation of the human mind and its powers was commonly treated as a scientific enquiry requiring the application of a scientific methodology suitable for the development of natural science more generally; and scientific methodology and scientific conclusions were even deployed, on all sides, in debates on the existence and nature of God.

These two positions, in the first case including no more than political economy, moral philosophy and history, and in the second

case giving weight to 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, which proposes inclusivity as the form of the solution by focusing on the culture of the enlightened ones of Scotland, those so-called literati, the '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'.[5] Richard Sher, who formulated this cultural definition,[6] 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 morality, 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. The third position, that of inclusivity, has been chosen as a defining feature of the book. One reason for the choice, and the chief one, is that each of those three hard-defended positions has been promoted by experts on the Scottish Enlightenment whose credentials for passing judgment on what the Scottish Enlightenment is are widely recognised as impeccable. The nature of the Scottish Enlightenment remains a contested question, and it is not for a Cambridge Companion to deliver an answer which might have the consequence that swathes of intellectual endeavour, regarded by leading scholars as integral to the achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment, are excluded from discussion in the pages of this book. A second reason for choosing inclusivity is that the great intellectual debates of eighteenth-century Scotland 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; I have in mind philosophers working not only on political economy, moral philosophy and history but also on, for example, questions regarding art, literature and the concepts of beauty and the sublime. (Chapters 14 and 15 provide instances of disputes in these latter fields.) 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 by the practitioners 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 give due weight to the formidably wide range of intellectual disciplines which the literati were able to draw on from within their own resources, and which strengthened their endeavours in the fields in which they worked.

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 may 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 in Scotland was also 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 international Enlightenment was a Republic of Letters, a multi-national company dealing in ideas, in which people put their ideas into the public domain to be criticised and improved, or – so be it – criticised and sunk. Within this marketplace Scotland contributed a great deal and was also the recipient of ideas, which it then took up and transformed 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 appropriated them, made them their own, by developing those same ideas in characteristic ways. Chapters 10 and 11 make clear Scotland's indebtedness in this area, as does Chapter 9 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. David Hume and Adam Smith are spectacular examples of Scotland's citizens active in 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 because it enables us to explain the direction of progress in the many countries that were beneficiaries of this Scottish invisible

export. In this volume we shall focus on the Scottish Enlightenment's immense impact on America; the Scottish Enlightenment might indeed 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 at and helped to govern colleges which in due course became great universities. The students of these immigrants, as is demonstrated in Chapter 16, 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.

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 not received a great deal of attention from scholars, though there are heroic efforts now under way to rectify this situation. The final chapter traces the nineteenth-century story in terms of what may be judged to be 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.

This second edition of the Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment is significantly different from the first. There are five newly written chapters, those on the human mind and its powers, on moral sense and the foundations of morals, on political economy, on art and aesthetic theory and on literature and sentimentalism, this last-mentioned topic not present in a systematically developed form in the first edition. All of the remaining chapters, with the exception of Chapter 2, which is virtually unchanged, have been substantially or very substantially revised.

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. Immanuel Kant, 'What Is Enlightenment?' in James Schmidt, *What Is Enlightenment?* London 1966, pp.58–64; also in Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966, pp.54–60.
5. Richard B. Sher, 'Science and Medicine in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Wood, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 104.
6. 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.