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# The 'Hotbed of Genius': Edinburgh's *literati* and the Community of the Scottish Enlightenment

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*Here I stand at what is called the Cross of Edinburgh, and can, in a few minutes, take fifty men of genius and learning by the hand (Smellie, 1811, p. 252).*

One day between late 1770 and early 1771, the philosopher and historian David Hume (1711–1776) set out from his apartment in the Old Town of Edinburgh.<sup>1</sup> Having assumed the daily habit of supervising the construction of his house in the unfinished New Town, he took a shortcut across the part-drained Nor' Loch. As he strolled across the boardwalk he 'made a slip, fell over, and stuck fast in the bog' (Greig, 1932, Vol. II, p. 223). A portly gentleman in his late fifties, Hume was unable to free himself and called to some passing Newhaven fishwives for assistance. However, the fisherwomen refused to help the man they instantly recognised as the 'wicked unbeliever'. They denied him rescue until he recited the Lord's Prayer 'in solemn tone' to their satisfaction (Mure, 1854, Vol. II, p. 177). Unsurprisingly, he obeyed, and was consequently extricated from his predicament. William Mure of Caldwell later disclosed that his close friend Hume regularly retold this story at dinner parties with great relish, declaring the fishwives: 'the most acute theologians he had ever encountered' (Mure, 1854, Vol. II, p. 178).

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<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to pinpoint an exact date. David Hume announced that work had begun on his new house in the autumn of 1770, which was completed by Whitsunday in 1771.

‘Edinburgh is a hotbed of genius’, declared Tobias Smollett in his novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1785, p. 244). Two centuries later, Nicholas Phillipson asserted controversially that ‘the history of the Scottish Enlightenment is the history of Edinburgh’ (Phillipson, 1973, p. 125). Recent scholarship of the Enlightenment in Scotland claims that too much historical emphasis has leaned on the capital city, stressing the Enlightenment experience also touched Glasgow (Hook & Sher, 1995) and Aberdeen (Carter & Pittock, 1987). Nevertheless, as the northern capital of Great Britain, Edinburgh was Scotland’s seat of local autonomy, hosting its national institutions: the Courts of Session, Justiciary, and Exchequer; the Convention of Royal Burghs; minor Commissary and Admiralty Courts; and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. It was also home to a distinct community of educated elites known contemporarily as *literati*. This was a familiar plural noun in eighteenth-century Edinburgh, consensually referring to a wide network of professionals – not aristocrats – who worked and socialised in the city (Emerson, 1973, p. 318). Composed primarily of lawyers, clergymen, professors, medical men and wealthy merchants, this intelligentsia formed the backbone of a newly defined Scotland as it stood following the Union of Parliaments in 1707.

This article, split into two parts, will argue that Edinburgh constituted the intellectual hive of the Scottish Enlightenment, concentrated in – but by no means confined to – the capital city. The first part shall illustrate the cultural command possessed by the Edinburgh *literati*, exploring the examples of the Select Society and John Home’s controversial *Tragedy of Douglas* (1757). The second part will concentrate on the *literati*’s involvement in plans for the New Town of Edinburgh, evaluating how far these plans constituted

an attempt to realise the ‘philosophers’ ideal city in stone’ (Daiches, 1964, p. 68).

## **I - The Arbiters of Taste: Cultural Leadership and Controversy**

After the Union, Scotland wallowed socially, economically and culturally. The majority of the country’s aristocrats had migrated south; its modes of government were disbanded; its trade remained poor (Shaw, 1983, p. 20). By the early 1750s, however, Scotland reached a pivotal moment recognisable both contemporarily and retrospectively. With the Jacobite threat suppressed after 1746, and an unprecedented growth in the economy towards the middle of the century, a fundamental shift in Scotland’s political and cultural management occurred. The nobles and parliamentarians were gone, but the learned elite of Scotland’s traditional institutions – the law, the Church and the universities – attained a considerable new level of control. Dominantly unionist and Hanoverian, the ambitious and opportunistic *literati* sought to take advantage of the gradual abatement of widespread doubts that had followed the Union. A great portion of this educated community believed strongly that assimilation with England was the key to a successful Scottish future. Consequently, many *literati* attempted to condense their Scottishness into a comprehensive and accessible ‘North Britishness’.

The year 1752 was of cardinal importance in the intellectual takeover of Scotland, its events indicating that the most influential figures of the Scottish Enlightenment had grown in confidence and reputation. David Hume published his important essay collection *Political Discourses* (1752) and was appointed keeper of the Advocates’ Library that April (*Minutes of the Faculty of Advocates* 1999, p. 15). The young Adam Smith (1723–1793) took up his post as a Professor

at Glasgow University, juggling an active social life between both Edinburgh and Glasgow clubs (Rae, 1895, p. 101). The long-dormant Philosophical Society was gathering momentum under the leadership of Henry Home, later Lord Kames (1696-1782), who Smith acknowledged as the ‘master’ of the *literati* (McElroy, 1969, p.37). The ‘Moderate Revolution’ of spring 1752 was an especially poignant moment, when intellectual clergymen – *inter alia* William Robertson, Alexander Carlyle and John Home – led the rationalist Moderate Party to gain hegemony over the General Assembly (*Annals of the General Assembly*, 1838, pp. 211-212). The *literati* were now decidedly established within the lifeblood of Edinburgh’s political and social institutions.

A labyrinth of tightly packed, steep closes in the Old Town was the converging point for an elite community in eighteenth-century Edinburgh. It was this enforced physical proximity that brought intimacy to the city, a closeness that echoes Hume’s recognition by the Newhaven fishwives (Cameron, 1967, p. 51). Due to such dense accommodation, few apartments had enough room to socialise in (Graham, 1937 p. 103), so men of letters met in the numerous taverns and coffee-houses clustered around Parliament Close to discuss, deal and gossip. This environment cultivated a distinct network of learned intelligentsia that encapsulated the very character of the Scottish Enlightenment. The intellectual movement of the Enlightenment in Scotland was, from its beginning to its end, innately sociable. David Hume justified his permanent return to Edinburgh in 1769 by claiming that he could find ‘no other city in Europe in which a circle of intellectuals could exist in such ease and proximity’ (McElroy, 1969, p. 10). The sociable element of this era facilitated a remarkable sharing of information amongst the *literati*,

calling for a scholarly understanding of the Scottish Enlightenment beyond the intellectual endeavours of brilliant individuals.

The Scottish Enlightenment is remembered for singular genius, but these men's lives were defined by social interaction. One would be hard-pressed to find a 'man of rank, influence or authority' (Clark, 1968, p. 30) who was not a member of at least one of Edinburgh's clubs. Far from merely soaking up the *literati's* leisure time, the plethora of clubs and societies found in Edinburgh's public rooms, coffee-houses and taverns were crucial to the development of their ideas for improvement. The overarching concept of this club culture was 'to improve anything [the *literati*] felt needed improving', (McElroy, 1969, p. 10) from propagating agricultural improvement or Christian knowledge to refining polite conversation and public speaking. The giants of the Scottish Enlightenment – an intellectual pantheon consisting of Hume, Smith, Robertson, Kames, Home, Carlyle, Adam Ferguson, Thomas Reid, Hugh Blair and many others – played critical roles in setting up and participating in clubs. The learned elite of Scotland gathered together in these convivial yet intellectually formidable settings. Consequently, the role of clubs in this community is paramount to understanding the *literati's* indefatigable hold over Scottish culture in the eighteenth century.

The most famous club of the Scottish Enlightenment was undoubtedly the Select Society (1754–1762). Created specifically to '[give] a Name to the Literati of this Country [then] beginning to Distinguish themselves' (Carlyle, 1860, p. 150), men of all professions and ranks sought membership within it. The Select stands as the 'supreme example' (McElroy, 1969, p. 48) of how the *literati* set out their collective agenda for Scotland's widespread improvement. The brainchild of Allan Ramsay (1713–1784), David Hume and Adam Smith assisted in the inauguration of the Select,

which effectively served as Scotland's elocution school and leading debating society. Proudly consisting of 'a set of the ablest men Scotland ever produced', (Ramsay, 1888, Vol. I, p. 469) the first Select Society meeting on 22 May 1754 was attended by fifteen eminent individuals, which rose by the following year to one hundred and thirty *literati* (McElroy, 1969, pp. 48-49). Competition for inclusion in the Select was fierce, emphasised here by David Hume:

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 amongst us, and on each occasion we are as much solicited by candidates as if we were to choose a member of Parliament... (Greig, 1932, Vol. I, pp. 219-221).

The Select was so highly regarded that one historian claimed a social psychologist could justifiably refer to its members as 'the reference group setting or sanctioning the norms to which Enlightened Scots should conform' (Emerson, 1973, p. 291). Such exclusivity and influence emphasises the intellectual dominance of Edinburgh's culture during the eighteenth century.

The *literati* of Edinburgh were a recognisable circle, open to an array of educated men who shared ideals for a civil society through rational knowledge and improvement. It was also a community that looked out for its own. Appointments of key *literati* into roles within the Faculty of Advocates, professorships, and William Robertson's successful nomination to become Principal of Edinburgh University (Cater, 1970) symbolised the intellectual elite's rise to power during the mid-eighteenth century. Influential Scottish aristocrats such as the 4th Duke of Argyll (1693-1770) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Bute (1713-1792) were instrumental in facilitating these appointments; both were strongly supportive of the *literati's* improving endeavours.

Patronage, like Edinburgh's club culture, was certainly not unique to Scotland, but served as a distinctive feature of the *literati's* cultural predominance (Sunter, 1976, p. 72). Furthermore, many *literati* were hotly protective of their friends' reputations. And, as their cultural prowess grew more conspicuous and unapologetic, the intellectual community had ample opportunity to defend their group against challengers to their supremacy.

From the mid-1750s, opposition to the intelligentsia's dominance of Edinburgh emerged, often from the ranks of the *literati* themselves. Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes (1726-1792), regularly castigated intellectuals such as David Hume, William Robertson and Lord Kames openly, yet also attended their Enlightenment clubs. Negativity towards the *literati* was not rare, and the perfect example of opposition to their cultural authority followed the success of Reverend John Home's *Tragedy of Douglas* (1757). This play, written by a Scottish minister and influential *literatus*, represented the intellectuals' endorsement of the theatre then being revived in Scotland, and provoked a violent backlash from traditionalist clergymen. Complaints against *Douglas* were along religious lines, but they simultaneously exposed strong views against the *literati* as the arbiters of taste in Scottish society. Copious pamphlets assailing *Douglas* appeared, including a vehement attack on the *literati* in John Haldane's *The Players' Scourge* (1758), which described the intellectual community as the 'imps of hell' (p. 1). However, the opposition was encapsulated in the work of John Maclaurin, Lord Dreghorn (1734-1796), who published a scathing satire of *Douglas* entitled *The Philosopher's Opera* (1757), which specifically targeted famous members of the *literati*.

Featuring thinly disguised caricatures of John Home as 'Jacky', David Hume as 'The Genius' and Lord Kames as 'Mr. Moral Sense',

Maclaurin attributed the success of *Douglas* solely to its endorsement by the *literati*, arguing that the ‘men of learning’ who propagated the play ‘mised’ audiences who were ‘afraid to contradict them’ (Maclaurin, 1757, p. iv). He continued, describing that ‘the taste of the country’ was in ‘a deplorable situation, being abandoned to a club of gentlemen, who are as unable as they are willing to direct it’ (Maclaurin, 1757, pp. iv-v). In an equally aggressive pamphlet entitled *Apology for the Writers of the Tragedy of Douglas* (1757), Maclaurin attacked the *literati* once again. Dismissing them as a ‘dictatorial club’ hell-bent upon ruining Scottish society with their blasphemous vindication of the theatre, he voiced his concern:

Some years ago, a few gentlemen in this town assumed the character of being the only judges in all points of literature; they were and still are styled the *geniuses*, and lately erected what they called a *select society*, which usurps a kind of aristocratical government over all men and matters of learning (Maclaurin, 1757, p. 2).

What all this resentment emphasised was that the Kirk no longer stood as the undisputed moderator of acceptable cultural activity in Scotland. Clearly, this title now belonged to the *literati*. In response to religious opposition against *Douglas*, many of Home’s friends supported the playwright. Adam Ferguson, David Hume and Alexander Carlyle each wrote pamphlets defending Home and the theatre, concurrently justifying their stance as the cultural leaders of Scotland.

Another attack on the *literati* occurred in the late-1750s when Kirk traditionalists accused David Hume and Lord Kames of heresy, an affront swiftly quashed by William Robertson and the Moderates before the case was even brought before the General Assembly for consideration (Sher, 1985, p. 61). Likewise, James MacPherson’s

dubious discovery of an ancient Scottish bard called Ossian – the ‘Gaelic Homer’ – was safeguarded against a torrent of English criticism by ‘inordinately proud Scottish defenders’ (Allan, 2006, p. 211). This almost unconditional guardianship of friends emphasises the strong sense of community shared amongst the *literati*, and was a distinctive feature of its cultural reign. Possessing some of the most brilliant minds of the period amongst its ranks, the *literati* carried a lot of weight in Edinburgh, which they utilised to advance their ideas of improvement for Scotland. Far from encapsulating a purely intellectual movement, however, this ‘bourgeoisie oligarchy’ (Phillipson, 1973, p. 142) also turned their hand to practical causes, including the *literati*-led attempts to petition Westminster for a Scottish militia (see Robertson, 1985). To evaluate their role in one such endeavour, this article will now turn to analyse the *literati*’s role as implementers of a physical community: the construction of a new Edinburgh.

## **II – ‘Let Us Enlarge and Improve This City to the Utmost’**

Historians of eighteenth-century Scotland dispute the significance of the Edinburgh New Town’s construction during the Scottish Enlightenment. Where one author lauds it as the physical embodiment of the *literati*’s ideals (Youngson, 1966, p. xiv), another dismisses it as mere coincidence (Chitnis, 1976, p. 22). The purpose of this article is not to assess the historical importance of the Edinburgh New Town, but to explore its role as the projection of a civil society pioneered by the *literati*. Many prominent figures of the Scottish Enlightenment authored at least one essay relating to aesthetics or taste during their careers, and papers on artistic subjects were welcomed at the meetings of various clubs (Emerson, 1973, p.

295). Recent research hints heavily towards the *literati's* involvement in schemes leading to the construction of the New Town of Edinburgh. The plan for the New Town was not unveiled until 1767, but this objective began earlier with the publication of an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Proposals for carrying on certain PUBLIC WORKS in the CITY of EDINBURGH*. As mentioned previously, 1752 was a breakthrough year for the *literati*: it was in this year that the pamphlet was published.

Charles McKean argues that the *Proposals* can be justifiably identified as the embodiment of the Scottish *literati's* goal to align Scotland with a truly British agenda (McKean, 2005, p. 44). The document mourns the lack of appropriate public buildings in Edinburgh, purporting to 'adorn it with public buildings' to stimulate growth and attract 'useful people' (*Proposals*, 1752, p. 9). It describes the Union of 1707 as a pivotal moment for Scotland's unfortunate past, emphasising that 'NOW is the time' (*Proposals*, 1752, p. 3) for drastic improvement. The authorship of the *Proposals* has remained uncertain, but evidence exists to suggest that key figures of the *literati* had a direct hand in the development of this document (McKean, 2005, pp. 44-46). Sir David Dalrymple's parody of the *Proposals* clearly hints at the involvement of Hume and Kames (Dalrymple, 1753, p. 14), and contemporary Town Council minutes allude to George Drummond's – a prominent club member – discussions with various 'persons of quality' on the projected improvements (Town Council Records, 1 July 1752, SL1/1/70 Edinburgh City Archives). Irrespective of whether the *literati* had a direct hand in the *Proposals* or not, in its eloquence and philosophy it is written in the language of the *literati*. Moreover, it encapsulates their improving agenda.

In 1765, a competition for designing the New Town of Edinburgh was opened, and won by the architect James Craig (McKean, 2005, p. 46). Craig's plan represented far more than a necessary expansion of the city due to growing congestion in the Old Town; it was a vision of an entirely new city laid out with unprecedented order and symmetry. As shown by Figure 1, Craig's original plan is clearly in the form of the Union flag, which was deemed unworkable due to its complicated street angles. A bolder step to an overtly British agenda would be difficult to find. McKean recently argued that the New Town design constituted Scotland's 'rejection from the past' (McKean, 2011, p. 41), having stated elsewhere that 'only an ardent North Briton would ever have risked perverting Scottish history to that degree' (McKean, 2005, p. 46).



Fig.1 - James Craig's competition-winning design for the New Town of Edinburgh, c. 1765.

In 1767, a highly regulated street plan appeared, consisting of street names such as Hanover Street, George Street, Thistle and Rose Streets, which encapsulated the unionist *literati's* vision for a thoroughly British town in the Scottish capital (see Figure 2). The New Town was a far cry from the closes and taverns of the High Street, viewed as a clean slate upon which to build a new civil

society for Scotland along British lines. At either end of the plan were two squares symbolising the patron saints of England and Scotland, George Square (later renamed Charlotte Square) and St Andrew's Square, connected forever by a long road that represented the House of Hanover: George Street. These symmetrical and regulated streets were the antithesis to the cluttered closes of the Old Town, but commerce and leisure was to continue in the latter whilst the former would remain purely residential: at least in theory. The cramped Old Town had formed a cohesive community of learned elites which flourished there, but many of the *literati* were staunch unionists anxious to express their loyalty to the Hanoverian dynasty by turning Edinburgh into a British provincial capital. Many – though by no means all – *literati* moved to the individual houses in the New Town in rejection of their apartments in the Old. '[I]rresistibly symbolic of the idea of civilization cherished by the Edinburgh *literati*' (Daiches, 1964, p. 70), the New Town was to be a corporeal representation – and consolidation – of a new North British identity, pioneered by Scotland's intellectual community.

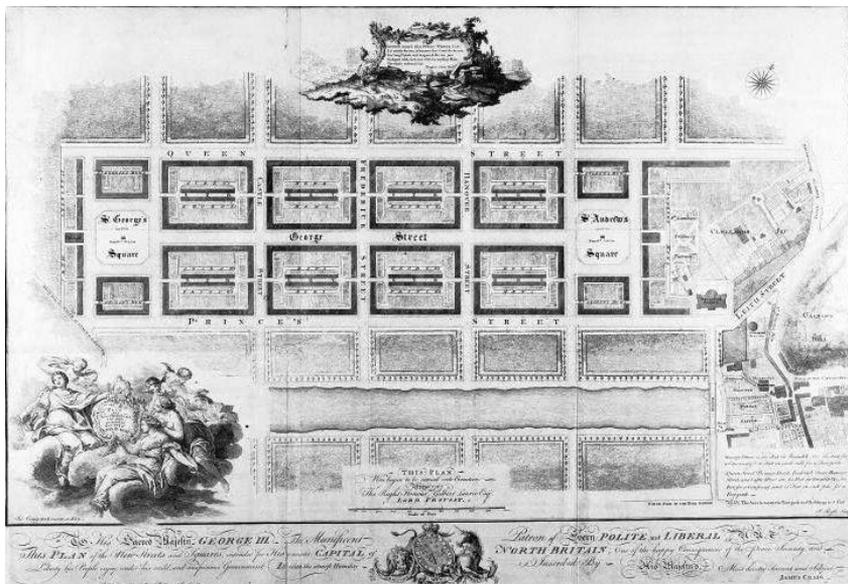


Fig.2 - The accepted plan of the Edinburgh New Town, dated 1767.

This article has argued that the cohesive community of the Edinburgh *literati* characterised the Scottish Enlightenment. Individually, their intellectual contributions were internationally significant, impacting economic policy, religious reform, scientific discovery, language refinement, philosophy and history. Collectively, however, the Scottish intelligentsia dominated cultural activities and pioneered schemes for social improvement. Their leadership in the Scottish capital arguably culminated in the creation of the New Town, which remains the architectural heirloom of the Enlightenment experience in Scotland. However, the legacy of the *literati* extends far beyond town planning. Clubs, literary traditions, and a reputation for Edinburgh as a global centre of learning were viewed as gifts that the Enlightenment's beneficiaries – such as Francis Jeffrey and Lord Henry Cockburn – sought to perpetuate. The new *literati* took up the mantle of their predecessors, translating their agenda into a nineteenth-century ambition to transform Edinburgh into the 'Athens of the North'. Through architecture and letters, the late-Georgian and early-Victorian intelligentsia strove to cement Edinburgh's reputation as cultural capital of the British Empire. This manifesto ultimately owed its roots to the Scottish Enlightenment. A letter between two *literati*, Alexander Carlyle and Gilbert Elliot, was to supply the bait: '[Thomas Sheridan] has told us that Edinburgh is the Athens of Great [Britain]...and we believe him' (Carlyle, 1761, MS. 11015, p. 106, National Library of Scotland).

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