The Scottish Contribution to the Enlightenment

John Robertson, St Hugh's College, University of Oxford
1997

The Scottish Enlightenment was only born as a distinct subject of scholarship between thirty and forty years ago. The exact date of birth is uncertain, because paternity, or at least credit for the name, was promptly disputed by Hugh Trevor-Roper and the late Duncan Forbes. Their dispute was enlivened by obvious differences of style and tone - they certainly made the most of it; but its keenness always belied the extent to which the protagonists' conceptions of the new subject were complementary. Forbes developed his account in a series of studies of Hume and Smith, culminating in *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (1975); but even more important was the Special Subject which he offered in Cambridge in the 1960s. Entitled "Hume, Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment" in order to be accepted by a Faculty sceptical of the existence of the Scottish Enlightenment as such, this attracted Quentin Skinner, Nicholas Phillipson, and many others: it was to be seminal not only for the Scottish Enlightenment, but for the whole renaissance of intellectual history in Britain since the 1960s. [1]

As the title of the course indicates, Forbes's Scottish Enlightenment was an intellectual movement to which others besides Hume and Smith had made important contributions, and which had concentrated upon the understanding of society and its development; it was also a cosmopolitan movement, whose frame of reference extended well beyond Britain. A similar conception informed Trevor-Roper's interpretative sketch of the Scottish Enlightenment as a whole, in his address to the Enlightenment Conference of 1966 in St Andrews, published in the following year. Stimulated both by the opening-up of eighteenth-century Scotland to new ideas from continental Europe and by their country's experience of unusually rapid economic and social development, Trevor-Roper argued, the Scottish thinkers had made common intellectual concern within what they termed the 'progress of society'. [2]

That the Scottish Enlightenment of Forbes and Trevor-Roper belonged within the wider European Enlightenment was confirmed (if not anticipated) by the Italian historian, Franco Venturi. Himself committed to a conception of the Enlightenment in which Italian illuministi were as much participants as French philosophes, Venturi immediately extended a welcome to the Scots. In his address to the Eleventh Congress of the Historical Sciences in 1960, and again in the Trefelyan Lectures at Cambridge in 1969 (published as *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* in 1971), Venturi pointed out the contrast between the England which repudiated John Wilkes and the Scotland which supported David Hume and Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and John Millar. Together, Venturi argued, these Scots had formed a nascent 'Intelligentsia', such as existed in Paris, but was quite unknown in London. It was in Scotland that the essential elements of the Enlightenment were to be found: a backward and a modern world existing in close chronological and geographical proximity, along with patriotic groups and societies concentrating attention on economic and social problems. A 'comprehensive study' of the Scottish Enlightenment had accordingly become one of the most necessary pieces of research in eighteenth-century European history. [3]

Venturi's Enlightenment was a single intellectual movement, whose adherents were spread throughout the European world, and were committed both to understanding and to furthering the modernisation of society. It combined hard, original thinking with a keen sense of the opportunities offered by increasingly enterprising publishers for the propagation of its ideas; and its proponents were typically both cosmopolitans, willing participants in the exchange of ideas across political frontiers, and patriots, devoted to the improvement of their own societies. Only occasionally were they in a position of authority from which to implement the reforms they advocated; but they were close to the centre of public life in their communities. (Venturi's Enlightenment was not a movement 'on the margins'.) To Venturi, as to Forbes and Trevor-Roper, what joined the Scots to this movement was their preoccupation with the progress of their societies and as the favoured objective of their own society. The Scottish philosophes may not have had to campaign as hard as their French or Italian counterparts in the face of injustice or religious persecution; the Enlightenment in Scotland may not have ended in revolution. Nevertheless, recognition of the Scottish contribution to the Enlightenment was powerful reinforcement of the Enlightenment's claim to have laid the intellectual foundations of the modern world.

Thirty years after its formulation, such a view of the Enlightenment, and of the Scottish contribution to it, is much more difficult to sustain. The difficulty is not simply the result of the frontal assault launched by the philosophies of postmodernism, for which the Enlightenment was the false prophet of the delusive values of rationalism and universality. The post-modern critique has intersected with other trends in historical scholarship, whose exponents have more or less wittingly assisted in undermining the earlier view of the Enlightenment. Three such trends can be separated out (although of course they are likely to be combined, in varying measures, in the work of any individual scholar).

One has been the natural tendency of scholarship to discover that what were once thought of as original, or at least distinctive, features of the Enlightenment were already in existence in earlier periods. An awareness of the opportunities offered by print for an alliance between intellectual and commercial enterprise existed well before the Enlightenment, as did a self-consciously international 'republic of letters'. [4] Still more marked, it can be argued, are the intellectual continuities. The Enlightenment invented no new field of intellectual enquiry, and even its most characteristic intellectual concerns - the conflict between self-interest and sociability, the transformation of society and politics wrought by the growth of commerce - were being discussed in the seventeenth century, if not earlier.

A second trend in Enlightenment studies has been towards inclusiveness. Not only have the geographical frontiers of the Enlightenment been extended to the furthest edges of Europe and the European world (a tendency to which Venturi himself gave the lead); but the association of the Enlightenment with a specific set of intellectual interests has been diluted, while the ranks of those involved as participants have steadily been enlarged. To the long-standing claims of literature to belong to Enlightenment studies have been added those of the natural sciences and the arts, while the printers and booksellers on whom the philosophers depended are increasingly recognised as participants in the Enlightenment in their own right. In many cases such inclusiveness simply reflects a liberal reluctance to exclude; but the tendency to treat all ideas as if they were intellectually equivalent, a tendency apparently characteristic of cultural history, now threatens to deprive the Enlightenment of any intellectual coherence.

A third tendency in Enlightenment studies has followed from the first two. As the continuities with previous periods attract more attention, while its scope is constantly extended, the differences within which was once taken to be a unitary, cohesive Enlightenment become ever more apparent. Increasingly it is thought desirable to distinguish varieties of Enlightenment. A Catholic, mostly southern European Enlightenment is to be distinguished from the Protestant, northern Enlightenment. Still more popular, especially among anglophone scholars, has been the approach to the Enlightenment in its national contexts. Brought into focus by the volume edited under that title by Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, [5] the approach has encouraged research into the interaction of...
Enlightenment ideas with local circumstances and intellectual traditions; but as these national differences are accentuated, the wider Enlightenment tends to slip from view. The once-unified movement of the Enlightenment is rapidly fragmenting.

Nowhere, perhaps, has the potential of the national context approach to the Enlightenment been better displayed than in the case of Scotland. The subject of one of the best essays in Porter & Teich's volume, by Nicholas Phillipson, has benefited from an explosion of scholarship since the 1970s, the greater part of which has been shaped by this approach. In turn, the approach has encouraged the two other trends noticeable in recent Enlightenment scholarship. There has been a new emphasis on continuities with earlier periods of Scottish intellectual history, opening up the intellectual life of the hitherto neglected later seventeenth century, and even seeking connections with the older intellectual movements of Humanism and late Scholasticism, of which Scots had once been such distinguished exponents. The scope for extending the Enlightenment to include other contemporary fields of intellectual activity has likewise been seized upon by historians of science, who have drawn attention to the promptness with which Scots took up Scholasticism, of which Scots had once been such distinguished exponents. The approach to the Enlightenment in national context has done much to enlarge our understanding of eighteenth-century Scottish intellectual life. But the national orientation of such scholarship has also tended to isolate the Scots from the wider Enlightenment. In so far as this has been resisted, moreover, it has been by aligning Scottish with English intellectual life, and discounting Venturi's sharp contrast between them. Encouraged by the national context approach to discover Enlightenment even in England, John Pocock and others have associated the Scots with the English in a common British Enlightenment. From here it seems only natural to distinguish the Scottish from the Continental European Enlightenment, and even to hold up the supposedly conservative scepticism of the Scots as an alternative to the radical, rationalist Enlightenment of the philosophes. There was really no such thing, Pocock has reassured us, as 'the' Enlightenment.

By now my own view of these tendencies in recent Enlightenment scholarship should be clear. I think that they have over-run their course. Like Margaret Jacob, [8] if on different terms, I wish to reaffirm the unity of the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement, and more specifically, to restate a version of the original view of the Scottish contribution to it. I shall make this case in two parts. First and more briefly, I shall consider the implications of recent work on the social status, professional careers and public roles of those Scottish men of letters who identified with the Enlightenment. Second, I shall review what I still take to be the central intellectual preoccupations of these thinkers: moral philosophy, the writing of history, and political economy. Despite critical differences between them, differences which have if anything been under-appreciated, I shall argue that the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment were unified by the commitment to human betterment in this world as the measure of progress, and to investigating the conditions of its achievement. But the nature of the Scots' contribution to the Enlightenment as a whole would be still clearer, I shall end by suggesting, if to existing studies were now added the original view of the Scottish contribution to it. I shall make this case in two parts. First and more briefly, I shall consider the implications of recent work on the social status, professional careers and public roles of those Scottish men of letters who identified with the Enlightenment. Second, I shall review what I still take to be the central intellectual preoccupations of these thinkers: moral philosophy, the writing of history, and political economy.

II

It was the assumption of the first historians of the Scottish Enlightenment that its adherents formed a small, distinct group of men of letters, who had sufficiently detached themselves from the conventions of their own society to identify with the wider movement of the Enlightenment at large. To Franco Venturi this meant that the Scots, like the philosophes, already formed an 'Intelligenzia' in the original, nineteenth-century sense of the term. Since then, however, a great deal of work by Roger Emerson, Richard Sher and others has made us much better informed about the social status and public role of eighteenth-century Scottish men of letters; how far do those initial assumptions need to be reviewed?

With one notable exception (to which I shall return) all those who associated themselves with the Enlightenment made successful careers in one or more of the three institutions at the centre of Scottish public life: the Universities, the Church, and the Law. Increasingly open to intellectual innovation, the universities offered one of the most congenial, and in many cases lucrative, forms of employment available to men of letters. The gradual replacement of the traditional system of teaching by 'regents' or generalist tutors by the creation of designated chairs in specific subjects made it possible for the new professors to concentrate on the development of their specialisms, and positively to attract students to their courses, to their own and their universities' financial benefit. [9] A similarly secure, if less lucrative career could be made in the Church of Scotland. Clerical orders might make it more difficult publicly to express heterodox religious views, but they were otherwise no bar to pursuing this-worldly intellectual interests. This was especially true in Edinburgh, where the 'Moderate' clergy, led by William Robertson, provoked controversy over patronage, but successfully avoided it in theology. [10] The position was less easy in Glasgow, where the guardians of Presbyterian orthodoxy remained on the alert for the first half of the century; and later John Witherspoon led a lively counterattack on Moderatism. The third profession to support men of letters in eighteenth-century Scotland was the law. It was not as open as either the universities or the Kirk, since entry to the higher levels of the legal profession, as advocates and judges, was effectively restricted to the sons of landowners. [11] Even so, the presence of men of letters within a profession so closely connected to the landed elite facilitated their acceptance more generally by the upper ranks of Scottish society.

Integrated into the existing structure of society by the professions which employed them, the men of letters further consolidated their position by participation in the informal, voluntary associations of 'polite' urban culture, the clubs and societies which multiplied in Scotland as everywhere in enlightened Europe. In several cases - the Select Society of Edinburgh, the Glasgow Literary Society, the Aberdeen Philosophical Society - these were deliberately constituted to ensure that men of letters were on at least an equal footing with the landed, legal and merchant members. [12] In others, notably the Poker Club, the relationship was positively familiar, literati and gentry meeting convivially for dinner. What Scotland's cities did not foster were salons - or any equivalent of the Parisian salons - women, alas, seem to have played almost no role in the Enlightenment in Scotland. It is possible that Freemasonry offered an alternative opportunity for social integration; but despite pioneering work on the origins of Freemasonry in seventeenth-century Scotland, [13] we still know almost nothing about its appeal in the eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, there were limits to the integration of men of letters within Scottish society. These were best exposed by David Hume, whose career became an exemplary lesson in enforced intellectual independence. Having withdrawn from Scotland to France to educate himself as a philosopher, Hume returned in 1739 with the Treatise of Human Nature, and the apparent expectation that a university career would follow when a suitable chair became vacant. But when he applied for the Edinburgh chair of Moral Philosophy in 1745, he found himself debarred by an overwhelming coalition of academic, clerical and political interests; and a suggestion that he apply for a chair in Glasgow in 1752 was discounted even by his friend Adam Smith. The intellectual reasons for his exclusion I shall come to shortly; its practical consequences were that he was obliged to accept from his patrons a series of short-term appointments, the most satisfactory of which were in military or diplomatic service, since they enabled him to travel. [14] Of necessity, Hume set himself to earn his own living as an independent man of letters, an ambition finally realised through the success of the History of England. The experience clearly left Hume ambivalent. He was always anxious to avoid public controversy, whether with the Kirk or with fellow men of letters; equally, however, he enjoyed and increasingly made a point of his intellectual independence.

No other Scottish man of letters had independence thus forced upon him; but several clearly saw and sought out its attractions. Adam Smith abruptly gave up his chair in 1764 for a tutorship and the prospect of travel with a pension thereafter - effectively a research fellowship for life; his later decision to take an office in the Customs appears to have compromised only his time. Adam Ferguson fought a long battle in the 1770s to secure leave from his chair to travel in Europe and North America. Collectively, moreover, the men of letters were careful to ensure that their acceptance by the landed and legal elite was accompanied by respect for their own expertise, framing the rules of their societies with this in mind. They also maintained their own connections with...
The Scottish Contribution to the Enlightenment by John Robertson | Institute of Historical Research

Since the 1960s, our understanding of every aspect of the Scottish Enlightenment's thinking has been enhanced and complicated by an impressive body of philosophy of morals is read as an extension and elaboration of Hutcheson's. [19] But this account of the relation between Hutcheson and Hume is now in the prevailing view, from Norman Kemp Smith to David Norton, has been that 'Hume, under the influence of Hutcheson, entered into his philosophy through the gateway of morals'. Hume's philosophy of morals is read as an extension and elaboration of Hutcheson's. [19] But this account of the relation between Hutcheson and Hume is now in question. In what is probably the most original contribution to recent scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment, James Moore has argued that the relation was not one of influence, but of fundamental opposition. His evidence is both circumstantial and philosophical. It seems that Hutcheson was almost certainly the author of the successive critical reviews of Books I and III of the Treatise of Human Nature which appeared anonymously in the Amsterdam Journal, the Bibliotheque Raisonnee in 1740 and 1741, reviews which made a point of exposing the differences between Hume's work and Hutcheson's. [20] For his part, Hutcheson must quickly have realised the depth of their differences. His initial, apparently deferential attempts to reconcile Hutcheson to his position were at best optimistic, and quite possibly mischievous. For philosophically, Moore argues, Hume was always a sceptic, in morals as well as epistemology. His sources were those of Mandeville (whom Hutcheson detested): Bayle and the French Augustinian moralists, Hobbes, but above all the ancient Epicureans. On this basis, an experimental theory of morals was bound to portray man as self-interested and unsocial, forming societies by the artificial, not natural, convention of justice. [21] Hume can hardly have been surprised when Hutcheson later opposed his candidacy for the Edinburgh chair of moral philosophy; [22] and his response, the deliberately 'polite' but rigorously argued Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals (1751), may be seen as underlining his break with both Hutcheson and the academic idiom of natural jurisprudence. [18]

The particular importance of Hutcheson for the Scottish Enlightenment, however, has always lain in his relation to Hume. The prevailing view, from Norman Kemp Smith to David Norton, has been that 'Hume, under the influence of Hutcheson, entered into his philosophy through the gateway of morals'. Hume's philosophy of morals is read as an extension and elaboration of Hutcheson's. [19] But this account of the relation between Hutcheson and Hume is now in question. In what is probably the most original contribution to recent scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment, James Moore has argued that the relation was not one of influence, but of fundamental opposition. His evidence is both circumstantial and philosophical. It seems that Hutcheson was almost certainly the author of the successive critical reviews of Books I and III of the Treatise of Human Nature which appeared anonymously in the Amsterdam Journal, the Bibliotheque Raisonnee in 1740 and 1741, reviews which made a point of exposing the differences between Hume's work and Hutcheson's. [20] For his part, Hume must quickly have realised the depth of their differences. His initial, apparently deferential attempts to reconcile Hutcheson to his position were at best optimistic, and quite possibly mischievous. For philosophically, Moore argues, Hume was always a sceptic, in morals as well as epistemology. His sources were those of Mandeville (whom Hutcheson detested): Bayle and the French Augustinian moralists, Hobbes, but above all the ancient Epicureans. On this basis, an experimental theory of morals was bound to portray man as self-interested and unsocial, forming societies by the artificial, not natural, convention of justice. [21] Hume can hardly have been surprised when Hutcheson later opposed his candidacy for the Edinburgh chair of moral philosophy; [22] and his response, the deliberately 'polite' but rigorously argued Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals (1751), may be seen as underlining his break with both Hutcheson and the academic idiom of natural jurisprudence. [18]

This radical reassessment of Hume's relation to Hutcheson suggests the need to be alert to other potential fault-lines within Scottish moral philosophy. Adam Smith is also often taken to have been the disciple of the teacher he called 'the never to be forgotten Dr Hutcheson', while following Hume in the attempt to combine a concept of sympathy as the foundation of moral judgement with an acknowledgement of self-interest as the primary passion. But it is unlikely that Smith's relation to either was so simple. It is at least suggestive that soon after he began lecturing at Glasgow, Smith was reported by suspicious local observers to have been openly critical of his predecessor. [23] On the other hand, the treatment of the idea of sympathy in the Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) suggests a renewed willingness to think in terms of natural sociability, notwithstanding the prevalence of self-interest in the most basic material relations between men. Hume immediately questioned Smith's extension of the concept of sympathy; [24] and the difference between them may be thought to have been underlined by Smith's increasing deployment of Stoic themes in later editions of the work. Still more in need of reassessment is the moral philosophy of Adam Ferguson. Never a pupil of Hutcheson, Ferguson infuriated Hume by dispensing with any attempt to derive moral judgement from sympathy in favour of a simple reassertion of the classical ideal of virtue. To Ferguson the sociability of men was explained neither by natural benevolence nor by the artificial utility of justice: instead it derived from their proclivity for war.

Throwing these fault-lines within Scottish moral philosophy into relief dispels any notion of a unified 'school'; but it also serves to clarify what the Enlightenment philosophers still had in common. Their starting-point was agreement that moral philosophy must respond to the emergence of a form of society apparently driven by the acquisitive pursuit of material goods. The principal analytical question, they further argued, was whether sociability, virtue and justice were natural to mankind, or were rather the artificial constructions of self-interested individuals. And the answers, they all accepted, must be...
made publicly available, not in the academic jargon of natural jurisprudence, but in a form and idiom which should sell to a philosophically interested laity. Of itself, this conception of moral philosophy was by no means unique to the Scots; but the quality of their thinking, and their willingness to integrate moral philosophy with the study of history and of political economy, made it central to their contribution to the Enlightenment.

History, the second subject at the heart of the Scottish Enlightenment's interests, was itself investigated in two forms, which for the most part were kept separate. One of these was 'natural' or, as it was later christened, 'conjectural' history. The most famous single example of the genre was Hume's Natural History of Religion, finally published in 1757; but it was more widely pursued, by Smith, Ferguson, Robertson and Millar, in the form of stadial theories of the development of society as a whole. As in moral philosophy, a conceptual framework for the discussion of historical development in terms of 'society' was already available in natural jurisprudence; and Smith and Millar made extensive use of it in their teaching. Here too, however, the natural jurisprudential framework was discarded in print. None was more ruthless in this respect than Ferguson, the first book of whose Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767) displayed an impatience with the rigid categories of natural law and contract theory unmatched even by Montesquieu. Recent, closer examination of the varieties of Scottish stadial theory has shown that they were by no means simply materialist in their treatment of causation; indeed it is quite possible that the emphasis on unintended consequences was - in some minds - compatible with a continued, conceptually structural, role for Providence in human history. But it remains the case that stadial theories were exclusively concerned with the development - the progress - of society in this world, and paid no heed to the next.

The second form of historical enquiry pursued by the Scots was the traditional narrative. Here Hume was once again the pioneer, in his attempt to write a modern, sceptically impartial History of England. The political message of the History has exercised scholars since the 1960s; [25] and recently a new dimension has been added to the discussion by Colin Kidd's explanation of why a work initially entitled the History of Great Britain had to be reduced to a History of England. The answer lies in Hume's radically dismissive view of Scottish history. Denying the existence of any 'ancient' constitution in the Scottish past which might serve as a basis for liberty in the present, Hume was obliged to conclude that the story of the English ancient constitution was the only one whose telling would serve a useful political purpose in Hanoverian Britain. British history was perfector Anglo-British, and Hume had to concentrate on clearing away the partisan myths that hindered an impartial understanding of the English constitution. [26] What remains to be explored is the extent to which Hume also attempted to integrate social, cultural and literary developments into his narrative. But it looks as if his ambitions in this respect were limited: his conception of narrative seems closer conceptually (though not stylistically) to the 'civil' history of Giannone than to the history of manners undertaken by Voltaire, let alone to a 'social' history of the sort suggested by the stadial theorists.

If this judgement is borne out, however, it will only enhance the achievement of William Robertson. Robertson may have begun by writing a civil history of Scotland. But he then proceeded to write an international history of Europe in the time of Charles V, of which the first volume was given over to a 'View of the Progress of Society in Europe' from the fall of the Roman Empire, and contained an extended discussion of the feudal system. Even more ambitious was the History of America, which included the first sustained attempt to use stadial theory in writing the history of specific peoples. [27] All of these were soon to be dwarfed by the achievement of Gibbon; but the difference between Hume's England and Robertson's America is one measure of how far the Scots had already come in the writing of history.

The third and, I want to suggest, most important of all the intellectual preoccupations of the Scottish Enlightenment was political economy. In this case an historical understanding of the Scots' achievement has depended on rejecting the traditional, doctrinal approach to the history of economic thought. The task was successfully accomplished by two books in particular, Donald Winch's revisionary study of Adam Smith's Politics (1978), followed in 1983 by Hont and Ignatieff's Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment. [28] Here and elsewhere it was argued that the Scots approached political economy through two older traditions of political thought, the classical or civic humanist critique of commerce and more particularly of public credit, and the natural law theories of property rights and exchange. There is a real danger, nevertheless, that the political economy of the Scottish Enlightenment has been liberated from one interpretative straitjacket only to be constrained within others. In print, Hume, Smith and Sir James Steuart all presented economic principles as distinct and free-standing, as if confident that they could be understood in their own terms, without the need for extended reference to the natural law framework still used in teaching. So doing, they presumably expected to achieve greater conceptual clarity and the advancement of economic analysis for its own sake. At the same time, they clearly hoped to educate a wider reading public in the understanding of economic processes, and, at a distance, to influence the formation of government economic policy.

Hume again made the decisive initial contribution, in the economic essays in the Political Discourses (1752). I believe it can be shown that these essays were written as a systematic response to contemporary French political economy, and particularly to Jean-Francois Meloni's Essai Politique sur le Commerce (1734, reissued with additional chapters in 1736, and republished on several occasions in the 1740s and 1750s). Against Meloni's model of an economy in which agriculture was primary, requiring all other branches of economic activity to be subordinated to its demands, Hume offered one in which commerce itself was the agent of development, and its chief obstacles were jealousy of trade and the misuse of its instruments, money and credit. Responding in turn to Hume, Steuart's Principles of Political Economy (1767) offered a careful, lengthy defence of continental orthodoxy. To which the reply, devastating in its silence, was the Wealth of Nations (1776), where Adam Smith set out a new synthesis, which restored agriculture to first place in the 'natural progress of opulence', but fiercely criticised the Physiocrat dirigeisme which would maintain agriculture's primacy at the expense of the natural development of manufactures and commerce.

Here too, however, the differences between the Scots enhance rather than detract from their collective achievement. Ultimately Hume and Smith were agreed that an understanding of the technical processes of economic development was essential to both the understanding and the justification of modern society. For it was clear that the operation of these processes held out the prospect of real material benefits for most if not all of society's members. Growth agreed that an understanding of the technical processes of economic development was essential to both the understanding and the justification of modern society. In short, political economy was the conceptual foundation of the Scottish Enlightenment's commitment to the progress of society, and the sharp edge of its challenge to those men of religion for whom the supposed pains of this world were but a preparation for the imagined pleasures of the next. IV

Even if thirty years of scholarship have complicated matters enormously, therefore, it is still possible to argue that the Scottish contribution to the Enlightenment lay first and foremost in the analysis and advocacy of the progress of society. There is no need to abandon the Scottish Enlightenment to post-modernists and cultural historians. But to set that contribution properly in perspective, we still need to remedy the isolation of the Scottish Enlightenment which has resulted from the popularity of the national context approach among its historians, by undertaking more studies which connect and compare the Scots with their continental counterparts.
It is of course well known that leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment kept themselves informed of current developments on the continent, and especially in France, by travel, correspondence, reviews and book-buying. They could also respond directly to French work: Hume's engagement with Melon is one example, Smith's with Rousseau is another. But systematic textual study of the Scots' response to French thought is still in its infancy; and we know little about the access of the wider reading public to foreign books, whether by imports, reprints or translations.

Equally important to assessment of the Scottish contribution to the Enlightenment is a knowledge of the extent to which the writings of the Scots were known and read elsewhere. There was of course no guarantee that others would understand the ideas and arguments of the Scots as they themselves did. The dangers of misinterpretation are finely displayed in Fania Oz- Salzberger's study of German translations and readings of the works of Adam Ferguson: English terms which to the Scot denoted public, political activism were translated into German concepts associated with inner moral self-development. [29] In this case, national differences appear seriously to have interfered with the connection; but there are others in which the lines of transmission were less obstructed. To render 'refinement' as 'civilisation', as Jean-Baptiste Suard did in his translation of William Robertson's Charles V, was a shift of nuance, not a fundamental change of meaning; and in Italy, where all three of his Histories were translated, Robertson was justly appreciated for his account of the failings of the feudal system. [30] Scottish political economy was likewise read across the continent of Europe. Here French translations were the most common intermediaries: providing the Enlightenment with a common language, French helped to make political economy a particularly transmissible discipline, thus further enhancing its centrality to the Enlightenment's pursuit of human betterment in this world.

My final suggestion, however, is that studies of the connections between Scotland and other parts of the Enlightenment might usefully be complemented by studies which are deliberately comparative. These can serve the obvious and useful purpose of clarifying what was distinctive and what was common to the various branches of the Enlightenment. But they may also serve another, potentially still more revealing purpose: assessment of the 'success' or 'failure' of the Enlightenment in its various eighteenth-century settings.

There is no denying that in different places the Enlightenment had to contend with very different political and economic circumstances. In the case of Scotland, the Enlightenment may be thought to have enjoyed considerable 'success', the country's experience of economic transformation under a free government vindicating the Enlightenment's prescriptions for the progress of society. Over much of continental Europe, by contrast, a discrepancy between the Enlightenment's objectives and the actual political and economic experience of society is more obvious. Among several possible illustrations of this frustration of the Enlightenment, the one which is of most interest to me is that provided by the Kingdom of Naples. Beginning the century in a predicament very similar to that of Scotland, as a dependent and underdeveloped province of a greater monarchy, in 1734 Naples had unexpectedly acquired its independence, which in turn was widely expected to be the key to the institutional reform and economic transformation of the Kingdom. Yet despite the best efforts of successive generations of Neapolitan Illuminists, from Genovesi to Pagano, economic development obstinately failed to materialise, and the Enlightenment ended in the tragedy of the Parthenopean Republic of 1799. It may be an oversimplification to contrast Scottish 'success' with Neapolitan 'failure'. Nevertheless, if the Enlightenment is to be judged, it should be as an historical project, rather than as the philosophical aunt-Sally of the Postmodernists: and in historical perspective, the key question facing the Enlightenment concerns the extent to which its understanding of the progress of society, and its prescriptions for achieving the betterment of the human condition in this world, were adapted to the variety of the circumstances, and the insincerity of the obstacles, which it had to confront in eighteenth-century Europe.

Notes

14. Roger L. Emerson, 'The affair' at Edinburgh and the project' at Glasgow: the politics of Hume's attempts to become a professor', in M.A. Stewart & John P. Wright (eds), Hume and Hume's Connexions (Edinburgh, 1994); MA Stewart, The Kirk and the Infidel, an inaugural lecture at the University of Lancaster, (Lancaster, 1995).
But Wood simply uses Habermas's thesis as an opportunity to re-state the case for the importance of natural science.


21. James Moore, 'Hume and Hutcheson', in Stewart & Wright (eds), *Hume and Hume's Connexions*. Independently of Moore, a similar case for believing Hume to have differed fundamentally from Hutcheson has been outlined by Luigi Turco, in 'Hutcheson nel terzo libro del Trattato sulla Natura Humana', in Marco Guena & Maria Luisa Pesante, *Passioni, interessi, convenzioni. Discussioni settecentesche su virtù e civiltà* (Milano, 1992).


24. Hume to Adam Smith, 28 July 1759, in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, no. 36, p. 43: 'I wish you had more particularly and fully prov'd, that all Kinds of Sympathy are necessarily Agreeable. This is the Hinge of your System…'


