

TOWN-GOWN COLLABORATION:
THE EXAMPLE OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTLAND

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Abstract

This paper, slightly revised from the one presented at the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS) conference in New Haven, CT on June 20, 2015, recounts a rare, perhaps unique historical cooperation between those in academia and those outside its walls. It has gone largely ignored in mainstream histories that Scotland, which began the eighteenth century as a remote backwater, soon became a "hotbed of genius" that in many respects provided a model for colonial America. In this paper I will first present some historical background about the relation—or the lack of it—between town and gown, and then explain how, through the excellence of both its universities and its independent societies, Scotland showed the way to the rest of the Western world and continued to influence it for the better part of a century. There is much to learn from this little-known story at a time when universities once again, as during much of their history, have a near-monopoly over the life of the intellect.

Keywords: *Scottish Enlightenment; town-gown; universities; learned societies; Franklin*

This paper is an account of mutual regard and cooperation between town and gown in eighteenth-century Scotland, a phenomenon almost unique in history, and in a place one might least expect to find it. There are three facets to this story: the excellence of Scottish societies (which might suggest some ideas for NCIS); the collegiality within its universities, something that hardly goes without saying (although where should we expect to find collegiality if not in colleges?); and the easy rapport between these two worlds, which have historically been separate and unequal. Nor were the glory days of Scotland confined to its borders. Scottish Enlightenment literature dominated American college curricula from the Revolutionary to the Civil War, and its philosophy had a pronounced influence on the direction of American history. Lord Kames' *Elements of Criticism* (1762) was in use at Yale by the 1770s (Martin, 1961, 19); Hugh Blair's *Rhetoric* was in use by the 1780s at both Harvard and Yale (Charvat 1936, 31); and John Quincy Adams taught this same book at Harvard from 1806 to 1809 (Daiches 1990, 213). By the 1830s these two texts were required reading at Pennsylvania, Columbia, Brown, North Carolina, Middlebury, Williams, Amherst, Hamilton and other institutions (Martin, 1961, 24).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There exists some crucial historical background about the relationship between town and gown that somehow tends to be omitted from college curricula. From its birth at Bologna in 1088 the Western university has dominated intellectual life, but then came movable type in 1443. The result was that, along with the printed Bible, Gutenberg spawned another new creature, one that has never received much press: the educated layperson. To all appearances the university remained at the peak of its power but, as the Galileo scholar Stillman Drake tells us in "Early Science and the Printed Book: The Spread of Science Beyond the Universities" (1970, 46), by 1550 there was both U-science and non-U-science ('U' denoting 'university-based'). [Drake, incidentally, was an independent scholar who made his living as a financial consultant. He taught only for twelve years in later life, when the University of Toronto recognized his invaluable independent studies of Galileo's life and science, and offered him a full professorship. Thus Drake was never dependent on academia for his livelihood or his reputation.]

By 1660, when the Royal Society of London was founded, the university was a sorry has-been. In 1665 the Royal Society launched its *Transactions*, which instantly became the center of scientific communication worldwide, and established scientific journals as the means, to this day, by which scientific discoveries are put forward. Nearly all the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century figures in science and letters worked outside academia: Pascal, Descartes, Boyle, Huygens, Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Laplace, Locke, Voltaire, Buffon, Montesquieu, Rousseau, La Mettrie, d'Alembert, Diderot, Condorcet, Maupertuis, Lavoisier, Priestley—the list is very long. Newton held the Lucasian chair at Cambridge for upwards of thirty years, and was the great exception, but he was such a loner that it hardly mattered where he was. And for the last quarter-century of his life, when he was not associated with Cambridge, he served as president of the Royal Society.

To support and publish the work of these men—and of course they were virtually all men—societies sprang up almost spontaneously, dotting the globe to within three degrees of the Arctic Circle. In a system "completely without precedent," as James McClellan writes in *Science Reorganized: Scientific Societies in the Eighteenth Century* (1985, 3, 126-7, 153), the informal learned society was "the characteristic form for the organization of culture throughout Europe and the

West in the eighteenth century." Up to a point this development was almost to be expected, because the mission of the university has traditionally been the preservation, study and teaching of established ideas rather than the development of new ones. Consequently a *de facto* division of intellectual labor developed between town and gown, one that continued through the nineteenth century. Immanuel Kant, for example, said in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798; 1992) that "associations of independent scholars constitute the 'workshops' [*Werkstätte*] of research, while government officials and clergymen trained at the university may be called the 'merchants' or technicians of knowledge." And "the government should not attempt to meddle," Kant said, with "this scientific free market" (quoted in Fleischacker 1996, 390).

But if there was a cooperative aspect to the division between town and gown, the overriding spirit was one of conflict. As we know, fear can take two forms, fight or flight. In England it was flight: Oxbridge dons simply slept and drank their way through the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. Adam Smith, who attended Oxford during the 1740s, later remarked in *Wealth of Nations* (1776; 1976) that professors there had "given up altogether even the pretense of teaching" (1976, 761 & n.6). On the Continent it was fight: the University of Paris (the Sorbonne) oversaw the Index of prohibited books, and did not hesitate to impose it. Its *Grand Amphithéâtre* (which I visited during a Scottish Enlightenment conference held at the Sorbonne in 2013) is rimmed with six statues, three representing a history of the university, and three—Descartes, Pascal and Lavoisier—representing science, or natural philosophy, as it was then called. When we were leaving the chamber, one distinguished senior scholar whispered to me, "None of these men would have been caught dead at the Sorbonne." Nor would the Sorbonne have been caught dead associating with them. Not until the 1690s was Descartes included in the curriculum; and at that point professors had little choice, for their income depended on the number of students they taught, and continuing to champion Aristotle "would have made them the laughing stock" of the Paris elite (Brockliss 1981, 66). Thus in Paris, as elsewhere, gown followed town.

During the nineteenth century universities returned to life. But there continued to be a natural division of labor between professors and independent scientists, including Charles Lyell, arguably the most important geologist in history, and Charles Darwin, the most

important biologist. Meanwhile in Germany a new university model emerged, which was mathematical, theoretical, specialized and professionalized, and which emphasized research over teaching (Wittrock 1993, 316-19). Centered in Gottingen, it first surfaced in America at Johns Hopkins, founded in 1876, and Hopkins became known as "Gottingen at Baltimore" (Cole 2011, 17-21).

Only in the twentieth century, for the first time in its history, did the Western university adopt the dual mission of teaching and research. And this effectively put learned societies out of business: some, like the Royal Society, still exist; but they have become largely honorary.

SCOTTISH SOCIETIES

At the turn of the eighteenth century Scotland was a remote, backward country from which nothing whatever could be expected. But with the Unification Act between England and Scotland in 1707—the Act recently reaffirmed in the Scottish referendum of September 2014—the Scots' watchword became 'mutual improvement'. By 1712 there was a club for "Mutual Improvement in Conversation": the Rankenian Club, formed in 1716 for "mutual improvement by liberal conversation and rational inquiry," lasted forty-eight years and published thirty books (McElroy 1969, 15, 22; Phillipson 1974, 433). Glasgow's burgeoning commerce gave rise to perhaps the earliest Political Economy Club (c.1743), whose members included tradesmen; and Adam Smith learned much from these men in the early gestation of *Wealth of Nations* (McElroy 1969, 30, 41). The Honourable Society of Improvers of Knowledge of Agriculture, the first in Britain, flourished in Edinburgh from 1723 to 1745 (see Phillipson 1973, 131), while the Society for Improvement of Medical Knowledge, founded in 1731, published case studies that attracted foreign students to the Edinburgh Medical School (McElroy 1969, 27). Membership of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh (1737), which grew out of its Medical Society, included fifteen doctors and surgeons, but also twelve lawyers, four soldiers, two clerics, two professors, an architect, a printer and librarian, an optician, an iron master and a mining company manager (Emerson 1979, 172). The Philosophical Society published three volumes of *Essays and Observations*, including a treatise on lightning rods by Benjamin Franklin.

The most influential Scottish society of all, as it turned out, was not in Edinburgh or Glasgow, but in the even more remote town of Aberdeen. Launched in 1758 by

Thomas Reid and a few other professors from Marischal College, the Aberdeen Philosophical Society was soon nicknamed the Wise Club, and it was just what we would want a learned society to be. Members generously supported each other's book projects, several of which were published and made names for their authors. The club met fortnightly for about three hours, at which a paper was read, followed by discussion of a separate topic. These topics covered the gamut: 'Why is the sky blue?'; 'Is proportional taxation equitable?'; 'What is it that provokes laughter?'; 'When is lime a proper manure?'; 'Do brutes have souls, and if so, how do they differ from those of humans?'; 'Is there reason to believe that friendships of this life might continue after death?'; and not least, 'How to structure the course of education so as to provide the best preparation for the different businesses of life?' (McCosh 467-73).

These questions were so wide-ranging that it is tempting to write them off as just bull sessions. But everything in Aberdeen was scientifically up to date. Immediately after its formation in 1758 the Wise Club began preparing for the transit of Venus of June 1761; the far more prestigious Royal Society dawdled until June 1760, and only acted then because it was prodded to action by a communication from the French astronomer Delisle (Wood 1984, 93).

Reid's first and most influential book, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), interestingly enough, came out of the Wise Club, not Marischal, where Reid was a regent. This philosophy swept Scotland, France and America, where it dominated college curricula from the Revolutionary to the Civil War; Emerson (1817-21) and Thoreau (1833-37) were steeped in it as Harvard undergraduates (Howe 1970, 50). In 1776 Thomas Paine, a bankrupt English émigré corset-maker with two failed marriages, published the first American instant bestseller, *Common Sense for Eighteen Pence*, which managed to convince even those for whom war with England was anathema—and they included many, if not most—that it was just a matter of common sense.

SCOTLAND'S UNIVERSITIES

In 1700 the University of Edinburgh was still an institution dominated by "conservative, scholastic Presbyterianism" (Phillipson 1974, 426). Yet because of a few outstanding mathematicians, Newtonian science was already being taught there, fifty years before it was even introduced at Paris, and a generation before

it received wide acceptance at Cambridge, where Newton himself held the Lucasian chair. As Leonidas Montes notes (2006, 262) "it was through the Scots that Britain rapidly became Newtonian," because Edinburgh had a few exceptional men who could present the highly abstruse Principia in a form accessible to a wider public.

By 1710 the leader of the Edinburgh Town Council and the president of the university were collaborating on reforming the university, instituting changes that would make Edinburgh "the most influential single institution in the higher education of the western world in the later 18th century" (Montes 428). Its medical school—the first in Britain—was founded in 1726, and by the 1750s it was surpassing the University of Leiden, which had dominated medicine for a century and more; the first American medical schools, in Philadelphia (1765) and New York (1767), were founded and staffed almost exclusively by Edinburgh graduates. The field of medicine also stimulated the development of specialized fields such as chemistry, botany, geology and paleontology, and Edinburgh thus "led the way in the early academic institutionalization of science" (Sloan 1971, 230, 231 and n.13).

In Scotland, as elsewhere, the university had to prove itself. The difference is that in Scotland it did prove itself. Its colleges—in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and St. Andrews—were all superior to those of Oxford and Cambridge, and Francis Hutcheson, generally considered the father of the Scottish Enlightenment, began lecturing in English (rather than Latin) at Glasgow in the 1730s, thirty years ahead of Cambridge. That eased the flow of communication between town and gown, as did the fact that Scottish professors, like everyone else, were dedicated to mutual improvement, and considered it their job to turn out constructive members of society. Universities in England and on the Continent, on the other hand, could hardly make that claim, and today the idea sounds positively quaint.

The country that most patterned itself after Scotland was America, itself a budding nation dedicated to mutual improvement. Philadelphia aspired to be "the Edinburgh of North America" (May 1976, 207). John Witherspoon, the most important American educator, came from Scotland in 1768 to become president of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University. There he taught a moral philosophy course which was tailored "to the needs of ordinary Americans;" and his students included future President James Madison,

thirteen future college presidents, twenty U.S. senators, thirteen governors, and three Justices of the Supreme Court (Martin 1961, 6).¹

Given the caliber of its universities, learned societies figured to be less of a necessity in Scotland, but they nevertheless multiplied like rabbits. It is impossible to say just how many there were, although Adam Smith is known to have belonged to at least nine (Redman 1997, 101). "All the world," as David Hume noted, clamored to join the Select Society, founded in Edinburgh in 1754 (Phillipson 1974, 444), just as many people today aspire to be a student or a professor at Harvard. But Harvard's exclusivity is part and parcel of its prestige (Kirschner 2012, B9) whereas the Select Society, notwithstanding its name, simply ballooned from fourteen members to 135 in five years (Phillipson 1974, 444). Scottish universities were second to none; yet almost anyone who could afford the comparatively modest lecture fees could attend (Cosh 2003, 55-7; Phillipson 2010, 39). Inclusivity did not diminish, but if anything, enhanced the quality of both its universities and its societies. Hume's skeptical philosophy was anathema to professors and the lay public alike; but that put no damper on his leadership of Scottish culture or his international renown. So who cared that he could not get a job in academia?

THERE AND HERE, THEN AND NOW.

Here we should further consider Ben Franklin, partly because of his important and close Scottish connections, partly because he was the very embodiment of common sense, and partly because he was an independent scholar *par excellence*. As a 21-year-old Philadelphia printer, Franklin started his Leather Apron Club (the "Junto,") for fellow tradesmen in 1727, expressly for the purpose of "mutual Improvement." In 1743 this club morphed into the American Philosophical Society, the first American learned society. Franklin, with a total of two years of schooling by his own account (1964, 52-3), was our most important eighteenth-century scientist. The reason he was called "Dr. Franklin" is that he received an honorary doctorate—not from Cambridge or the Sorbonne, but from the University of St. Andrews—in recognition of his groundbreaking work in electricity.

In his 1956 book *Franklin and Newton* (37, 70) the Newton expert I. B. Cohen points out that Newton

¹ On the influence of Scottish philosophers (particularly Adam Smith) on the framing of the American Constitution (especially Federalist 10), see Fleischacker 2002.

developed his theory of gravitation over twenty years in an ivory tower, whereas Franklin tossed off his science of electricity in scattered "moments snatched from public and private business during the 1740s and '50s." But in his 1995 book *Science and the Founding Fathers* Cohen saw fit to remark (118) that one reason Franklin is often not regarded as "a 'proper' scientist, and is relegated to the class of gadgeteers and inventors, is that he was not a university man." No one would have said such a thing in the eighteenth century, nor in the nineteenth; and Cohen himself had not spoken in these terms in the 1950s. At that point the number of scholarly references to Franklin were roughly equal to those to Newton; but within a decade Newton's citations had doubled, while Franklin's had been halved (Theerman and Seeff 1993, 20).

Franklin's eclipse coincided with the thorough 'universitization' of intellectual life during the 1960s. The American Council of Learned Societies was established in 1919, but its title has become a total misnomer, since its membership now consists almost entirely of universities. I attended the 2006 ACLS meetings as a representative of NCIS: this conference was held in the historic district of Philadelphia where Franklin lived and is buried, and where the first American learned society is located. In addition, 2006 was the big Franklin tercentenary and yet, so far as I know, no one ever mentioned his name. By contrast, at the NCIS meetings in Princeton a month later, we celebrated Franklin's tercentenary with a toast and birthday cake.

Throughout Western history, professors have written almost exclusively for other professors, rarely bothering to "truck, barter and exchange" ideas with anyone else, to borrow a phrase from Adam Smith (1976, 25). As a result, Louis Menand writes in *The Marketplace of Ideas* (2010, 106):

The weakest professional has an almost unassailable advantage over the strongest non-professional (the so-called independent scholar) operating alone, since the non-professional must build a reputation by his or her own toil, while the professional's credibility is given by the institution.

In terms of independent scholarship, this statement demonstrates the importance of eighteenth-century Scotland: this country, where many in 1700 had never seen a wheeled cart, was soon a "hotbed of genius" (Trevor-Roper 1967, 1650; Daiches 1986). While

French may be considered the *lingua franca* of the Enlightenment, who today considers Rousseau the equal of Hume, and what economist mentions Quesnay in the same breath with Adam Smith? The 35-volume *Encyclopédie*, compiled by Denis Diderot and 150 French scientists and philosophers (1751-72), which spread the ideas of the Enlightenment across Europe and beyond, was soon collecting dust, whereas the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, launched in Edinburgh in 1768, became a household name. And when it comes to collegiality between town and gown, the Scots invented the wheel.

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