Gender and Enlightenment Culture in Eighteenth-Century Scotland

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Over years of supervising student dissertations I have been petitioned by many with a wish to undertake a study of gender (or more particularly women) and the Scottish Enlightenment. I usually caution against this. Gender relative to the Enlightenment is so very difficult to pin down. The Enlightenment, after all, wasn't something that anyone knew they were doing or experiencing. Some people cultivated 'politeness' and some were keen to be 'civilized', or to civilize others – but was this the Enlightenment? A study of gender and concert going or book reading is so much easier. We know, more-or-less, what a concert or a library comprises and we quite often also know who went or read. Concert attendance or library borrowing might be an expression of Enlightenment culture, but may be not – there were competing and complex cultures at play in 18th-century Scotland, as Bob Harris has recently observed.(1)

The Enlightenment in Scotland was a very 'big thing', associated with major philosophers, famous books and influential ideas. People knew about these philosophers and their books at the time and scholars in large numbers have been studying the phenomenon ever since. It was once said to me by Rowy Mitchison, when I was at the start of my career and she was well retired, that there are only two themes in Scottish history that are worth pursuing to guarantee an audience comprising more than Scots – nationalism was one, and the other, of course, the Enlightenment. Rowy Mitchison, superb scholar that she was and an excellent historian of 18th-century women's lives and relationships (2), would probably never have thought of a connection between the Scottish Enlightenment and gender. Or else, if she had thought about it, she would have observed that the Enlightenment, like politics and war, was 'male', attached, as it undoubtedly was, to masculine institutions like the universities and professions and their associated clubs and societies. In Scotland, or, more precisely, in the capital city, there were no aristocratic female salons or patrons to mediate the great ideas of great men – as there were in Paris. And there were no genteel bluestockings, that is, intellectual and independent-minded women, with their public conversations and command of print media, as there were in London. The great philosophers of Scotland were so little impressed with the company of women that many of the finest – Hume and Smith included – didn't marry. The companionship of men seemed sufficient for their social as well as their intellectual lives, though Hume in later life did say that he 'took particular pleasure in the company of modest women, I had no reason to be displeased with the reception I meet with from them'.(3) In short, he liked a female audience when it was passive and didn't answer back.

Though the study of the Scottish Enlightenment as great men and their ideas marches on regardless, in recent years a group of impressive young female scholars has begun to tackle the singular lacunae in Scottish historical writing that is the absence of women and gendered concerns when compared with equivalent periods and issues in English, American or European history. Katherine Glover, Katie Barclay, Alison Duncan and Rosalind Carr have produced an impressive corpus of published work on 18th-century genteel women and their lives.(4) Their inspiration has come from two main springs. The work of Amanda Vickery on the 'gentleman's daughter' and subsequent studies in the broad area of 'politeness' from scholars such as Laurence Klein, Roey Sweet and Elaine Chalus has been one inspiration. And then there is the work of Jane Rendall who single-handedly and for decades, it seems, has sought to identify the gendered and especially the female dimensions, both in experience and ideas, of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Rosalind Carr's book builds on her own earlier work and that of the scholars noted above. It is in four themed chapters, introduced with an elegant survey of the social and economic context in which the Enlightenment emerged in Scotland, along with some of the main themes of intellectual analysis – progress and luxury; sympathy, sensibility and the emotions as female virtues; manly liberty and concepts of masculinity; refinement and North Britishness; and the moral threats inherent in a process of cultural change that was so influenced by France. The author sets out her understanding as one that has been shaped by Joan Scott's seminal work on the 'practice of gender' (p. 2). Gender becomes an analytical category to explore women and femininity and men and masculinity along with the ways in which these categories were constructed and challenged and changed. Thus gender as experience, and the relationships that flow from experience, are the fulcrum for analysis, rather than simply ideas about what men and women should be and do. Yet, as we see from the study as it unfolds, Enlightenment debate and writing was full of concern with what men and women should be and do. So considerable was this preoccupation at both the high end of ideas-construction in print, and at the lower end of popular, mostly emulative discussion through clubs and societies, that it speaks volumes of a profound anxiety in Scottish society and culture about changes in the lives of men relative to women, rather than the certainties that monolithic masculine institutions like the church or universities would seem to imply.

The first thematic chapter deals with masculinity, homosociability and intellectual culture and is focussed on four debating societies for which detailed records survive, using a Habermasian-framed approach to interrogate their activities and debates in a broadly conceived public sphere. The bodies are, in Edinburgh, the Select Society and the Belles Lettres Society; the Literary Society in Glasgow; and, in Aberdeen, the Philosophical Society. Each is explored within the detailed local context in which they operated – the Glasgow Literary Society, for instance, was strongly associated with the clergy and the University – to demonstrate both how associational culture offered opportunities for a formalised performance of masculinity and how these bodies focussed some of their debates on topics with a gendered resonance. Rules were set and policed, with one – the student-based Belles Lettres Society – seeing many infringements and expulsions (which is not surprising when the membership comprised boys in their mid teens, which was the typical age of Scottish university students at this time). They discussed many similar themes, often linking practical matters of improvement and growing luxury to concerns about the future of the nation and more domestic issues such as marriage, education of children and the treatment of women.

The second chapter continues the focus on organized debate through a search for Scottish women in associational life and in print. The inevitable conclusion is that there was very little of this to be found before the end of the 18th century. We are given a long account of the Fair Intellectual Club, which is known only from an anonymously authored pamphlet published in 1720. None of the members of the club has ever been identified, it is questionable whether it ever existed and the authorship is unknown. The pamphlet is an interesting cultural product – but it cannot reliably be read at face value. Yet it is all we have on women's associational life in Scotland before the 1770s. For a few years in the 1770s some women were present at certain public, ticketed debates, as reports of the Dundee Speculative Society and Edinburgh Pantheon reveal. These bodies, who charged a fee for attendance and provided some interestingly gendered refreshments (rum for the gentlemen, oranges for the ladies) appear to represent a form of popular

engagement with Enlightenment ideas, though some of the topics of debate were hardly new, having been debated for decades elsewhere. But they were also part of an urban entertainment industry, with parallels in some of the university lectures and demonstrations attended by women at this time alongside theatres, concerts and assemblies. Evidence on women's voting preference is indicated for some debates, but no woman ever addressed a meeting directly and the phenomenon seems to have been short-lived. Women in print were also thin on the ground in Scotland before Radical political circles brought one or two to the fore. In London, however, a series of Scots-born women flourished in print.

Having demonstrated that Scottish Enlightenment public intellectual culture was so consistently structured through embedded masculine institutions, the next chapter looks as what might be termed the 'softer' manifestations of polite and civilized culture – the culture of urbanity associated with growing towns and cities. Here, based on a familiar case study of Edinburgh, we encounter the assemblies, theatres and convivial societies along with taverns and prostitutes and other features of plebeian life where, by the end of the century, there is evidence that Enlightenment culture was 'not irrelevant to the lower classes' (p. 140). Here we also begin to confront one of the key ambiguities of studies of Enlightenment culture in that what is being discussed is a function of politeness, which has its foundation in French court rituals of the later 17th century, along with the growing European-wide preoccupation with civilized behaviour, which had multiple origins and strands. The last theme is developed in the final chapter titled 'Enlightened violence? Elite manhood and the duel'. A discussion of violence in Scottish intellectual discourse of the 18th century is an interesting inclusion and was a focus for discussion at a time when so many Scotsmen of elite background were in military employment. Duelling, however, was rare in Scotland compared with England or particularly Ireland, with just 31 cases during the years 1763 to 1842 (p. 154), about half of these between 1795 to 1815, a time of unprecedented military mobilization and intense public anxiety. Duelling was connected with ideas of honour and status, which were lodged in older notions of chivalry, and the author gives some fascinating accounts of men who found themselves in formal duels, which generally took place following a public insult and were reported in court cases and newspapers. The largest group of participants were soldiers – mainly young and with easy access to pistols. The relative absence of duelling speaks volumes of a society where a sense of personal public insult was mostly resolved through other means – the courts being one recourse commonly employed in a highly litigious age and social exclusion another. Sobriety in the cold light of day was probably the main reason why most men policed themselves. Non-violent dispute resolution was essential to social harmony in expanding towns and cities. Indeed, the history of inter-personal violence from the 17th century to the present is one of increasingly effective externally applied social control that is unconnected with the Enlightenment or any other coherent intellectual discourse.

In Carr's conclusion she offers a striking metaphor that is illustrated on the front cover in a contemporary engraving from the work of Edinburgh artist John Kay. 'The John Kay sketch that adorns the cover of this book depicts five unnamed people standing on Edinburgh's North Bridge. The men look at each other as if in conversation, while the women stand between them, with one facing away from the viewer. The women appear as listeners rather than as discussants themselves. They are present and yet they are relatively passive. In many respects this image is symbolic of women's place in Scottish Enlightenment culture' (p. 175). She might have added that David Hume would probably have approved.

Yet all is not as it appears in this image, for the male figures are known. They are both middle-aged bachelors, convivial and 'clubbable' men – the one on the left is Alexander Pierie, Esq. who was Extractor of King's Processes in the Court of Session and the other is his friend Mr Maxwell. The ladies, who are not identified, are represented in fashionable dress of the year the print was published – 1785 – and are, effectively, in the style of a fashion plate. Kay, who didn't hold back from identifying his female satirical subjects, and often got into trouble as a consequence, was making a joke, which is on the men who in their fusty, old fashioned batchelordom are blind to the beauties around them.(5) And yet the women are active, as they are elsewhere in Kay's prints. They are engaging with one another, if not with the men. The image is more complex and subtle than the author suggests and it is more engaged with a gendered audience of both men and women.

For this reviewer the study leaves as many questions unanswered as it resolves. I am left musing on how deeply ingrained in the female psyche was this culture of passivity. The answer must surely be that it was a surface, promulgated by a peculiar manifestation of Enlightenment culture and politeness, which was grafted onto an institutionally masculine world dominated by the universities, professional bodies, the military and the Presbyterian Church. Genteel women were absent, quiet or passive in some areas of public life in Scotland, but in other areas they were anything but and by the early 19th century the large numbers of single women, particularly in Edinburgh, gave rise to a generation who figured prominently in social and cultural circles (if not in the intellectual sphere) and were remembered as striking characters by men like Lord Cockburn, writing in the 1850s recalling his youth. Put the same women in London and those with literary or intellectual ambitions soon joined the bluestocking set, such as Anne Hunter the poet or the remarkable Joanna Baillie. A world of vigorous and opinionated women was frequently contrasted with what came after in the early Victorian age and was well illustrated in hugely popular if comic terms by Edinburgh novelist Susan Ferrier. And what about those powerfully present religious women who were represented mid-century, such as Mary Robertson (Mrs William Adam) – portrayed by Allan Ramsay during his Edinburgh years in the early 1750s at exactly the same time that he was attending the Speculative Society – who was sister of William Robertson, the clergyman historian, mother of Robert Adam the architect, and in image and reputation a remarkable presence. I also have a quibble about chronology, for this book ranges over a long time frame and gives little thought to some of the more detailed issues that underpinned the timing of particular manifestations of Enlightenment culture, such as the 1770s when there seemed to be a rapid popular dissemination of new ideas. Moreover, Scottish Enlightenment culture did not exist in a geographical vacuum. Elite Scots, both men and women, moved back and forth from England (and especially from London) to Scotland and many were skilled at culture-shifting their behaviour to match the different norms and expectations they encountered in metropolis, provincial centre and rural domestic life.

In conclusion this is a useful and brave attempt to embrace a complex, ephemeral and hard to define phenomenon. Gender in Scottish Enlightenment thought is relatively easy to identify and Carr has given us a fresh survey of how this was manifested in intellectual discourse, written and spoken. Women's contributions to intellectual production were negligible in Scotland before the end of the 18th century and even then it was slight. Trying to find something that doesn't exist smacks a little of asking the wrong question, but it is probably worth doing if only to establish, as others have before, that Scottish women had limited formal involvement in public intellectual life at this time. For me the problem begins when the book shifts to a consideration of Enlightenment culture, because there is a suggestion that everything that was manifested in the sphere of elite behaviour, or change in the environment in which elites operated must, by necessity, be a consequence of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was one of multiple, competing cultures, experienced in multiple, conflicted ways. Religious culture, commercial culture, and forms of gentry culture embedded in long-held ideas of family and kinship existed and evolved in parallel with the intellectual discourses that defined the Scottish Enlightenment and could have been more fully explored.

Notes

1. Bob Harris, 'The Enlightenment, towns and urban society in Scotland, c.1760-1820', *English Historical Review*

, 76 (2011), 1097–36.Back to (1)

2. See, for instance, Rosalind Mitchison and Leah Leneman, *Sexuality and Social Control: Scotland, 1660–1780* (Oxford, 1989).Back to (2)
3. David Hume, *My Own Life* (1776).Back to (3)
4. Katie Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power: Marriage and Patriarchy in Scotland, 1650–1850* (Manchester, 2011); Alison Duncan, 'Old maids: family and social relationships of never-married Scottish gentlewomen, c.1740–1840.' (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2013); Katherine Glover, *Elite Women and Polite Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2011).Back to (4)
5. A Series of Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings by John Kay (Vol. 2, pt. 2, Edinburgh, 1838). Plate CXXXVIII, 'Mr Pierie and Mr Maxwell'.Back to (5)