

E is for Enlightenment by Kyle Granite A—Z of Scottish History



"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".

(remark by Mr Amyat, King's Chemist and recorded by William Smellie)

When people think about the Age of Enlightenment, they probably think about romantic European cities such as Florence or Paris and great philosophers such as Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Immanuel Kant or Jean- Jacques Rousseau. It may surprise you that in the mid 1700s Scotland was famed across the world for her reputation as an intellectual powerhouse, leading the way in fields as varied as philosophy, science, economics, medicine, law and history. In fact, the roots of modern economics, linguistics and sociology can all be traced to the Scottish Enlightenment. So what exactly was this movement and why was Scotland, with a population of under one million (one sixth of that of England), a hotbed for all the clever clogs of the day?!

The Age of Enlightenment, also known as The Age of Reason, was a period in the 17th and 18th centuries which saw a flurry in scientific discoveries, support for "radical" ideas such as liberty, tolerance, progress, equality and fraternity, a drive in artistic expression, a move towards rational thinking over superstition and an overall focus on the pursuit of knowledge. Historians disagree on the origins of the movement, with some crediting René Descartes' and his philosophy of Cogito, ergo sum, (I think, therefore I am) from 1637, while others claim the publication of Sir Isaac Newton's Principia Mathematica from 1687 marked the end of the Scientific Revolution and the beginning of the Enlightenment.

By the end of the seventeenth century Scotland had largely been at the mercy of the strict, puritanistic shackles of the Calvinist Church which restricted free thinking and ruthlessly punished any form of religious dissent. The beginning of the new century brought with it a significant shift in thinking across Europe and particularly in Scotland. The list of Scottish enlightened thinkers is certainly impressive: David Hume, philosopher and author of A Treatise of Human Nature; Adam Smith, economist, philosopher and author of The Wealth of Nations; Adam Ferguson, philosopher and historian; Henry Home, Lord Kames - philosopher and agricultural improver; Mary Somerville, astronomer, science writer and polymath; Francis Hutcheson, philosopher; William Robertson, historian; James Hutton, geologist, agriculturalist, naturalist and physician; Thomas Reid, philosopher and great mind behind The Scottish School of Common Sense which heavily influenced Thomas Jefferson and eighteenth century American politics; James Watt, inventor, mechanical engineer and chemist, inventor of the Watt Steam engine; William Adam and sons (Particularly Robert), architects, Carolina Nairne, Lady Nairne, writer and song collector - to name but a few!



Engraving of Joseph Black visiting James Watt in his workshop in Glasgow University, c1760

Edinburgh was the epicentre for intellectual activity in Scotland with the very many salons, coffee houses and University dorm rooms playing host to lively discussion and debate. In fact, American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin argued that "the University of Edinburgh possessed a set of truly great men, Professors of Several Branches of Knowledge, as have ever appeared in any age or country".

So why was this little nation in northern Europe leading the way not only intellectually, but also in building a more efficient and fairer society? A lot of it comes down to the high literacy levels amongst all classes in Scotland, which was a product of John Knox's Reformation which stressed the importance of all people being able to read the Word of God. Education was a high priority in Scotland with an established parish school system since 1696 with the Settling Schools Act. On top of this Scotland had five universities; St Andrew's, Glasgow, Edinburgh, King's College and Marischal College (both in Aberdeen), all of which were embracing the new liberal ideas that were sweeping the Western World.

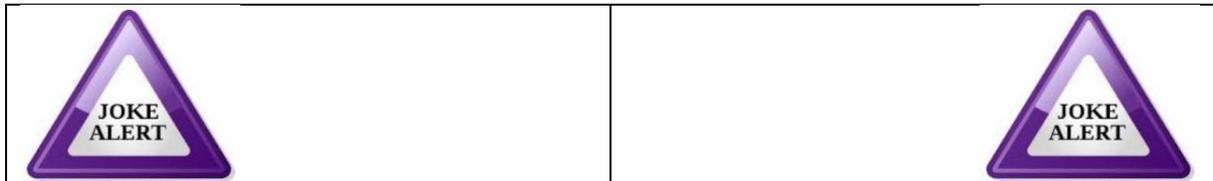
These institutions distributed the ideas of the Enlightenment to the new generation of lawyers, doctors, schoolmasters and ministers teaching the values of improvement and tolerance and became the driving force behind intellectual change in Scotland, whilst also being the venues where enlightened ideas manifested. Scottish Universities were able to embrace these radical ideas when her European counterparts were threatened by constant wars or under the leadership of regimes hostile to the revolutionary ideals of the enlightenment.

Publication of pamphlets and journals such as the Scots Magazine, meant that the Scottish Enlightenment was not limited to the wealthy, elite thinkers but was able to trickle down the ranks to all educated classes in society and subsequently the practical movement of ideas throughout Scotland. For this reason, and the extensive schooling system, those from lower social classes were able to rise through the ranks and successfully enter into the prestigious world of the Scottish elite - National Bard, Rabbie Burns, is a perfect example.

The legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment is substantial, the great minds that were born out of this movement heavily influenced the American and French Revolutions. Scots invented new technologies which drove the Industrial Revolution and others such as the telephone, the television, and penicillin, made life that little bit more pleasant! Scotland today continues to be instrumental in world politics despite its relatively small population. This year Glasgow will play host to world leaders for the UN Climate Change Conference, yet again being centre stage for the great minds of today, in order to secure a better tomorrow.



"The Parliament Close and Public Characters Fifty Years Since" 1796 by Sir David Wilkie



An Arab Sheik was admitted to the Hospital for heart surgery, but prior to the surgery, the doctors needed to have some of his blood type stored in case the need arose. As the gentleman had an extremely rare type of blood that couldn't be found locally, the call went out around the world.

Finally, a Scotsman was located who had the same rare blood type. After some coaxing, the Scot donated his blood for the Arab. After the surgery, the Arab sent the Scotsman a BMW, a diamond necklace for his wife, and \$100,000 US dollars in appreciation for the blood donation.

A few months later, the Arab had to undergo a further corrective surgery procedure. Once again, his doctor telephoned the Scotsman who was more than happy to donate his blood. After the second surgery the Arab sent the Scotsman a thank-you card and a box of Quality Street chocolates.

The Scotsman was shocked that the Arab did not reciprocate his kind gesture as he had anticipated. He phoned the Arab and asked him: "I thought you would be more generous than that. Last time you sent me a BMW, diamonds and money, but this time you only sent me a lousy thank- you card and a box of chocolates?"

To this the Arab replied: "Aye laddie, but I now have Scottish blood in me veins."