

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

Edinburgh Book Festival

***The Enlightenment – the international influence
and impact of Scotland and the Scots***

Professor Tom Devine

17 August 2009

Report by Peter Barr

Was the Scottish Enlightenment Scottish?

Professor Tom Devine believes the flowering of genius in 18th-century Scotland was influenced by several key events and ideas, including Calvinism and capitalism, centuries of “intellectual networking” all around Europe – and “the death of politics” after political union with England. But why are we the only nation in the world to turn a universal event into an object of national pride?

The Scottish Enlightenment, Professor Devine declared at the start of his lecture, was “invented” by the philosopher WR Scott more than 100 years later in 1909. Today it’s a “totemic and iconic” badge of honour, but it’s only been during the last 30 years that the Scots have moved away from a “victim” perspective (dwelling on disasters like the Darien Scheme, the Clearances and the Glencoe massacre) to trumpet the achievements of our great 18th-century thinkers – sometimes even daring to claim that Scotland invented the whole modern world.

One reason why the Scottish Enlightenment was neglected for so many years, he later suggested, was that Scottish historians were living in “a glen of tears,” appalled by the horrors of industrialisation which seemed to flow directly from the economic theories and inventions of the period, and obsessed with the dark side of Scotland.

The puzzle, he said, is why the Enlightenment happened at all. At the end of the 17th century, Scotland was still persecuting witches and hanging blasphemers (including Thomas Aitkenhead in 1697 for comparing the Bible with *Aesop’s Fables*). There was widespread poverty, and trade was being strangled by protectionist tariffs and war. The “vengeful Presbyterians” despised any form of deviance. We were a small nation, living next door to a giant, prone to parochialism and introspection.

Yet within 50 years, the Scottish Enlightenment was already emerging into the light from the darkness of “fanaticism, prejudice and the tyrannical influence of tradition,” promoting tolerance and “violent disagreement that did not end in violence.” Scotland was one of the “hot spots” of Enlightenment in Europe. There was a commitment to learning and the world of the mind, with a strong interest in the use of reason to explain human behaviour and a belief that improvement was possible through rational intervention.

The Enlightenment was not unique to Scotland, said Devine, but the Scottish Enlightenment was distinctively Scottish, “looked at through a Scottish lens,” and – unlike other countries – based in universities (Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Glasgow).

It also had extraordinary cohesion, said Devine, and encompassed every discipline – like the Royal Society of Edinburgh, a child of the Scottish Enlightenment. But above all, he added, it was a “Christian Enlightenment,” deeply influenced by Calvinism, and most of its pivotal figures were content to embrace Christian values (at least, in public) and believed in a propertied, enlightened oligarchy, “going with the flow” rather than promoting atheism and democracy. They were also Anglophiles – not Scottish patriots but citizens of the world.

The big issue, Devine said, was how this great phenomenon had flowered so quickly in such “barren soil,” and his argument was that the roots of the Enlightenment were incubating long before 1700 – fertilised by several key events in the first half of the 18th century.

Even though the country was poor, Scotland was not an intellectual desert, said Devine. Scottish academics “served their time in Europe” from the 13th century onwards and were the first to teach Newtonian science. The great “virtuosi” were also leaders when it came to law, biology and medical science.

Scotland also took a systematic approach to the funding of schools, including special taxes and, after the Reformation, everyone was encouraged to read so they could read the Bible for themselves. Devine then described how Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was first read by 14-year-olds, already fluent in Latin and attending school 12 hours a day, five and a half days a week. “No other ethnic group in the British Isles could compete,” said Devine, giving rise to the notion of “Scots on the make.”

The Scottish identity is inextricably linked with Calvinism, according to Devine, and the Calvinist obsession with morality was one of the precursors of the new social sciences, while the urge to “understand God’s design” was also a driver of science. “People could reflect and think for themselves,” said Devine, and even though some people feared that this would lead to anarchy, it also led to breakthroughs in philosophy, science and the arts.

Religion was also less orthodox after the Union of the Parliaments in 1707, while the Patronage Act also boosted secular influence. The Church of Scotland was also becoming more liberal, and the Secession reduced fundamentalist power.

Devine also suggested that after Union, “politics did not exist in Scotland.” There were no ideological divides, so intellectuals did not need to take sides and could debate issues free of constraint. The crushing of the Jacobite rebellion was also welcomed by most intellectuals in Scotland, as urbanisation began to accelerate, fuelled by the linen and tobacco trade, the Clearances and Empire.

But history does not move in straight lines. Professor Devine later suggested that the Scottish Enlightenment had not completely triumphed in the end over its Jacobite rival, since the “great tartan monster” seems to have hijacked the national character, even though most people in the lowlands treat “Highlandism” with contempt.

But above all, Devine said, there is no escape from the fact that Calvinism changed the “shape, nature and stamp” of the Scottish Enlightenment more than any other internal or external factor.

Was the Scottish Enlightenment Scottish? “Wha’s like us?” may be the only reply.

Q&A

Would the Scottish Enlightenment be possible today? Professor Devine said that sometimes we focus too much on the 18th century, neglecting later geniuses like James Clerk Maxwell. Today, he added, we do have world-class thinkers in disciplines such as life sciences and electronics, but perhaps there is not enough reverence for the world of the mind, and we are let down by the media and the cult of celebrity. The advantage of the 18th century, he added, was the universality of knowledge and the fact that intellectuals were not specialists, equally comfortable with science and the arts, as opposed to the “ghettoised” thinkers of today. We should also not forget the negative aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment, including their elitist attitudes and the “monstrous behaviour” of overseas Scots in the British Caribbean, for example, able to reconcile their “progressive” attitudes with the “rapaciousness” of colonialism.

Asked if Scotland could “go it alone,” Devine neatly sidestepped, declaring his political allegiance by stating that “the future is not my period” – a reply which any politician would be proud of, said the Chair, Brian Taylor (Political Editor of BBC Scotland).

Was the emergence of world-class intellectuals like Adam Smith and David Hume simply good fortune? According to Devine, it was no coincidence that there were many other great intellectuals around at the time, excelling in multiple disciplines such as architecture, literature, science, art, sociology, anthropology and economics.

Finally, Devine was asked to grapple with the question of whether the Enlightenment was a consequence of the Reformation or a “counter-Reformation.” He replied by suggesting that this would make a good topic for his next RSE lecture – a prospect warmly welcomed by the audience.