



Property, Patronage, and the Politics of Science: The Founding of the Royal Society of Edinburgh

Citation

Shapin, Steven. 1974. Property, patronage, and the politics of science: The founding of the royal society of Edinburgh. *The British Journal for the History of Science* 7(1): 1-41.

Published Version

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4025174>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3353812>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

PROPERTY, PATRONAGE, AND THE POLITICS OF SCIENCE: THE FOUNDING OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF EDINBURGH

STEVEN SHAPIN*

THE institutionalization of natural knowledge in the form of a scientific society may be interpreted in several ways. If we wish to view science as something apart, unchanging in its intellectual nature, we may regard the scientific enterprise as presenting to the sustaining social system a number of absolute and necessary organizational demands: for example, scientific activity requires acceptance as an important social activity valued for its own sake, that is, it requires autonomy; it is separate from other forms of enquiry and requires distinct institutional modes; it is public knowledge and requires a public, universalistic forum; it is productive of constant change and requires of the sustaining social system a flexibility in adapting to change.¹ Support for such an interpretation may be found in the rise of modern science in seventeenth-century England, France, and Italy and in the accompanying rise of specifically scientific societies. Thus, the founding of the Royal Society of London may be interpreted as the organizational embodiment of immanent demands arising from scientific activity—the cashing of a blank cheque payable to science written on society's current account.

Yet it is not necessary to view scientific activity solely in this way, nor to interpret scientific societies along these lines. Historical insights based on the twentieth-century university laboratory and professional-discipline society may very well prove inadequate in assessing the organization of science in past centuries. From the seventeenth century until far into the nineteenth century the enterprise of natural knowledge was very much an element in general culture. In many places, at various times, men of science (including Fellows of the Royal Society) thought of natural knowledge as a constituent of general literate culture; demands for intellectual separateness, when expressed, were never unambiguous. The institutions in which men of science functioned, whether university, academy, or scientific society, were subject to many of the same social,

* Science Studies Unit, University of Edinburgh, 34 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9JT.

For permission to use manuscripts in their care, I should like to express my appreciation to the University of Edinburgh (and especially to the Keeper of Manuscripts, Mr C. P. Finlayson), the National Library of Scotland, the Faculty of Advocates, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and the Wedgwood Museum Trust, Barlaston, Stoke-on-Trent. I am indebted to Dr Arnold Thackray of the University of Pennsylvania, Mr J. B. Morrell of Bradford University, Dr N. T. Phillipson of the University of Edinburgh, and Dr Marshall Presser of Temple University for reading and providing critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ Views of the institutionalization of science which are put forward in Joseph Ben-David, *The scientist's role in society: a comparative study* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), especially pp. 75–6,

political, and cultural forces as the institutions that sustained the practitioners of belles-lettres, medicine, antiquarian studies, or law. The fact of autonomy, the desire for autonomy, and, especially, the immanent necessity of separateness is extremely difficult to document in the history of a number of British scientific societies.² Nor is it acceptable to claim that good or true science requires social and cultural autonomy and that mediocre science (or 'scientism') is the only science that can function when embedded in total culture.

This account of the origins of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (founded in 1783) illustrates the deep involvement of a scientific enterprise in local cultural politics. It demonstrates that inherent requirements of intellectual scientific activity were a negligible factor in the establishment of a major scientific organization. Yet it is scarcely necessary to mention that the Royal Society of Edinburgh (and its predecessor, the Philosophical Society) provided a forum for distinguished men of science like Joseph Black, James Hutton, John Playfair, and Sir James Hall. By the end of the eighteenth century it was arguably the second-ranking scientific society in Britain. The founding of the Royal Society of Edinburgh was the result, not of necessary organizational demands of science, but of the particular position that scientific culture came to occupy in the local context. The present account is therefore a case study of the local politics of culture.

Depicting the organization of natural knowledge as an element in the organization of culture as a whole seems an appropriate approach in this particular instance. But such an approach may prove to have general significance to the study of the social relations of science. Examining science in its local cultural context may help to illuminate the themes with which a scientific enterprise deals, its social reference, its cultural image, and the conditions of a scientific career. Accordingly, I shall be examining the origins of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in the context of eighteenth-century Edinburgh society and culture and giving particular attention to the role of proprietary concerns, patronage, and local politics in shaping the institutional patterns of natural knowledge.

Enlightenment Edinburgh: progressive culture in a traditional city

By the close of the eighteenth century Britain was well on its way to becoming the world's first industrial nation. Although industrialization was still largely a rural phenomenon, the rapidly growing urban centres of Manchester, Glasgow, and Birmingham came to symbolize the process that was beginning to transform the face of Britain. Many of these new

² Recent studies which illustrate the role of British provincial scientific societies in the general cultural context include: Steven Shapin, 'The Pottery Philosophical Society, 1819-1835: an examination of the cultural uses of provincial science', *Science studies*, ii (1972), 311-36; and Arnold Thackray, 'Natural knowledge in cultural context: the Manchester model', *American historical review*, lxxix (1974), in the press.

industrial towns also produced new organizational forms for the culture of science. In the 1780s and 1790s 'literary and philosophical societies' were established in Manchester, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and in other industrial centres. The 'lit and phils' of the Midlands and North of England represented serious attempts at middle-class cultural self-expression, bringing together enlightened medical men, dissenting divines, and a locally élite audience of culturally adventurous manufacturers and tradesmen.³ In the context of very rapid population growth and industrial urbanization such societies often constituted the first local forms of organized literate culture, providing the middle-classes with appropriate cultural vehicles while at the same time distancing those who participated from their uncouth colleagues who had no literate culture.

If the phenomenon that was Manchester represented the direction in which British urban society was going, it did not, by the end of the eighteenth century, represent where British urban society actually was. The Mancunian context for culture was still very much the exception; the great majority of British cities were not industrialized, not growing at Manchester's astronomical rate, and not nearly so barren of institutional and cultural tradition. Indeed, the most superficial glance at late-eighteenth-century Edinburgh reveals that the Scottish metropolis provided a strikingly different cultural environment from the new industrial towns. Where the constitution of society is different, the social relations of science will be different. The social context which brought forth the scientific societies of Manchester and Newcastle was critically different from that which brought forth the RSE. The organization of science in Edinburgh answered to peculiarly local forces which had little to do with the industrializing context of 'lit and phil' science in the late eighteenth century.

Eighteenth-century Edinburgh was a city preponderant given over to the production of culture and services rather than to the production of things. It was a city whose élite classes were influential in directing economic change but which was itself insulated from industrialization and its attendant social and physical disruptions. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Edinburgh's population of 83,000 was the second largest of any city in Britain; by 1831 this was no longer the case, Edinburgh having been out-stripped by several industrial and commercial centres, including Glasgow, Liverpool, and Manchester. Edinburgh was distinguished from centres of industrial urbanization not only in its rate of population growth but also in its social composition and political position. Mid-eighteenth-century Edinburgh was half national metropolis, half provincial city-state; it looked proudly back on what it had once been—

³ The significance of the audience for scientific culture in the 'lit and phils' is briefly explored in Steven Shapin and Arnold Thackray, 'Prosopography as a research tool in history of science: the British scientific community, 1700 to 1900', *History of science*, xii (1974), in the press.

the capital of a quasi-independent Scottish nation—and far more uncertainly forward to its future role as *primus inter pares* of British provincial towns.⁴ Of special significance to the present account were Edinburgh's traditional cultural and professional corporations—their power and influence firmly rooted in Scotland's recent political history. Until the Treaty of Union with England in 1707 Edinburgh was the seat of an autonomous Scottish Parliament. But not since the Union of the Crowns of Scotland and England in 1603 had Holyrood Palace been the official residence of separate Scottish monarchs. Scotland's professional corporations of lawyers—the Faculty of Advocates and the Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet—sat in Edinburgh, and a feudally constituted Town Council directly, and surprisingly wisely, controlled the University of Edinburgh, founded in 1583. Among the thirty-three incorporated craft guilds represented on the Town Council were Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons.

Edinburgh was therefore a city whose cultural activities were largely in the care of traditionally established and formally incorporated institutions. It was a city where a considerable amount of political power resided and where, to a very large extent, knowledge meant power. As the winter capital of the Scottish landed classes, the national power-wielding élite flocked to Edinburgh, attracted for a variety of reasons—to supervise the education of their sons at the non-residential University, to attend to legal business at the Court of Session, to participate in the annual sittings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and, by the middle of the eighteenth century, to associate themselves with the sparkling Enlightenment society of David Hume, Adam Smith, Lord Kames, Joseph Black, James Hutton, and others in the myriad literary and social clubs of the metropolis.⁵

From among the transient gentry, minor aristocracy, and the resident professionals—professors, medical men, lawyers, and clergy—Enlightenment Edinburgh could draw upon a full reservoir of able cultural performers and willing, influential audiences. Street directories of the late eighteenth century reveal the differences between the social make-up

⁴ The social composition of the Edinburgh Enlightenment is a vexed question—one which has a great deal of relevance to some of the issues discussed in this paper. Limitation of space makes it impossible for me to give more than a brief sketch. For further discussion, see John Clive, 'The social background of the Scottish Renaissance', in N. T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison (eds.), *Scotland in the age of improvement* (Edinburgh, 1970), pp. 225–44; N. T. Phillipson, 'Culture and society in the eighteenth-century province: the case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *The university in society* (Princeton, N.J., 1974); Henry Gray Graham, *The social life of Scotland in the eighteenth century* (2nd edn., London, 1906), pp. 81–126; T. C. Smout, *A history of the Scottish people, 1560–1830* (London and New York, 1969), pp. 500–14.

⁵ Accounts of many of these Edinburgh clubs are contained in D. D. McElroy, *Scotland's age of improvement: a survey of eighteenth-century literary clubs and societies* (Pullman, Washington, 1969). More useful, because of its far greater length, is McElroy's thesis: 'The literary clubs and societies of eighteenth-century Scotland, and their influence on the literary productions of the period from 1700 to 1800' (University of Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis, 1952). See notes 11, 20, and 22.

of Edinburgh and that of an industrializing, trading centre like Glasgow. 5.4 per cent of Edinburgh's population in 1773-4 was counted as 'Nobles and gentry', against Glasgow's 1.0 per cent ten years later. Similarly, Edinburgh included 28.8 per cent 'Professional men' compared with Glasgow's 12.3 per cent, and only 12.5 per cent 'Merchants and manufacturers' compared with Glasgow's 30.0 per cent.⁶ The genteel, power-wielding segment of Edinburgh's society becomes of paramount importance in examining the institutional forces brought to bear on the organization of natural knowledge. And just as significant in contrasting the Edinburgh setting with that of the industrial towns was the relative paucity and impotence of the manufacturing and commercial population. Thus, a German visitor in the 1790s could claim, with some exaggeration, that 'In Edinburgh there is no trade; but from this circumstance Society is a gainer, both of intelligence and of elegance. The Society of Edinburgh,' he went on,

consists of 16 Lords of Session, a number of eminent and well informed Lawyers, a multitude of Physicians, the Professors of the University, many landed gentlemen who pass the Winter in town, and not a few agreeable young scholars among the 1200 students drawn thither by the celebrity of the University.⁷

The direction of Edinburgh culture was the charge of genteel and agreeable men, functioning in traditionally established institutions and traditionally recognized social roles—not that of the 'new men' of the Industrial Revolution. The Whig lawyer Henry Cockburn, describing the situation as it was in the early nineteenth century, could claim that

There was no class in the community so little thought of at this time as the mercantile . . . They . . . were far too subservient to be feared . . . Our Scotch commerce was only dawning; and no merchants great by the mere force of their wealth had made either themselves or their calling formidable. Still less had they risen to importance as liberal patrons of liberal pursuits . . . Nothing is so rare in Scotland as a merchant uniting wealth with liberal taste, and the patronage of art or science with the prosecution of private concerns . . . What have they done for learning, or art, or science?⁸

⁶ Smout, *op. cit.* (4), p. 381. Roughly comparable figures for 1831 reveal even more striking differences between the manufacturing and mercantile populations of Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Manchester. See *Abstract of the answers and returns made pursuant to an Act . . . for taking an account of the population of Great Britain* (2 vols., London, 1833), i. 304-08; ii. 970-3, 1000-3. The subject is also mentioned in L. J. Saunders, *Scottish democracy: the social and intellectual background* (Edinburgh, 1950), pp. 81-2.

⁷ [Mr. Voght of Hamburg], 'On the stile of society in Edinburgh: translated from the German journal of a traveller', *The Scottish register*, vi (April-June, 1795; publ. 1796), 137-46 (137).

⁸ Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of his time* (Edinburgh, 1909; originally published 1856), pp. 164-5. Although Cockburn claims to speak of Scotland generally, his observations seem not to hold as well for Glasgow as for Edinburgh. Among the founding Fellows of the Royal Society of Edinburgh only four per cent were merchants of any sort, and some of these were bankers and printers; see Steven Shapin, 'The Royal Society of Edinburgh: a study of the social context of Hanoverian science' (University of Pennsylvania Ph.D. thesis, 1971), p. 317. For a brief account of the significance of merchants and manufacturers in the Glasgow Philosophical Society in the early nineteenth century, see J. B. Morrell, 'Reflections on the history of Scottish science', *History of science*, xii (1974), in the press.

Edinburgh culture in the eighteenth century, both literary and scientific, turned for patronage and legitimation to the established corporations and the established landed and professional classes. As a direct consequence, the political and institutional problems of local science were closely tied to the concerns of the classes and institutions which formed the Edinburgh establishment. The consequences of such a social reference for Edinburgh science were far-reaching.

The Medical and Philosophical Societies of Edinburgh

The RSE was by no means a *de novo* creation.⁹ Its predecessors may be traced at least as far back as a 1731 'Society in Edinburgh for the Improvement of Medical Knowledge'.¹⁰ And even before the 1730s there existed in the city a number of cultural societies devoted in varying degrees to the cultivation of natural knowledge.¹¹ The effort to obtain a Royal Charter of Incorporation for what ultimately became the RSE in 1783 reflected, at one level, merely a re-ordering of existing cultural bodies; at another level, it manifested the introduction into Edinburgh society of relatively new political and institutional considerations.

The Edinburgh Medical Society of the 1730s was largely the creature of the medical professors at the rising clinical school at the University. Its leading light and organizational genius was Alexander Monro, *primus*, Professor of Anatomy from 1720 to 1758. Monro's work in the new Edinburgh Infirmary suggested to him the value of keeping 'regular Registers' of the most interesting cases and periodically extracting a 'Collection of Essays and Observations as would compose a Volume from Time to

⁹ For an organization of such significance, the RSE has attracted surprisingly little historical attention. Among modern accounts there are only two brief articles—both of very limited scope: James Kendall, 'The Royal Society of Edinburgh', *Endeavour*, v (1946), 54–7, and J. N. Davidson, 'The Royal Society of Edinburgh', *Journal of the Royal Institute of Chemistry*, lxxviii (1954), 562–6. The contemporary 'official' accounts of the founding of the RSE omit much of the political and institutional background to its establishment and are therefore of little use: [Alexander Fraser-Tytler], 'History of the Society', *Transactions of the RSE*, i (1788), 1–15, and the entry for the RSE (under 'Societies') in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (3rd edn., Edinburgh, 1797), xvii, 583–4. Also relevant are James David Forbes, 'Opening address [to meeting of the RSE], Monday, December 1, 1862', *Proceedings of the RSE*, v (1866), 2–34; David Brewster, 'Presidential address to Royal Society of Edinburgh meeting of 19 December 1864', *ibid.*, pp. 321–6 (focusing mainly on the RSE's development into a major geological forum in the early decades of the nineteenth century); and William Turner, 'Address on the occasion of the opening of the new home of the Society, 8 November 1909', *Transactions of the RSE. General index, 1889–1908* (Edinburgh, 1910), pp. 1–23. In this study of the founding of the RSE I have made little use of these sources and have derived my account from MSS. and other contemporary publications indicated below. For a somewhat more detailed account, see Shapin, *op. cit.* (8), pp. 80–208.

¹⁰ This group is not to be confused with a related *student* Medical Society based at the University which was founded in 1737 and received a Royal Charter in 1778. See James Gray, *History of the Royal Medical Society 1737–1937* (Edinburgh, 1952).

¹¹ These include the Rankenian Club, founded c. 1716, and the Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture, founded 1723. For details see McElroy 1969, *op. cit.* (5), pp. 22–6, and Shapin, *op. cit.* (8), pp. 47–79.

Time.’¹² All but one of the nine Edinburgh medical professors from 1731 to 1738 contributed essays to the series of five volumes of *Medical essays and observations, revised and published by a Society in Edinburgh*.¹³ The Society apparently existed solely for the purpose of producing these *Essays*, and it seems that, after a time, the editorial work devolved almost entirely on Monro, and the Society ceased functioning as an effective collectivity.

The Society’s publications succeeded in attracting wide and respectful notice to the work of the entire University Medical School. ‘A very excellent judge, Dr [Albrecht von] Haller, is pleased to observe that they [the *Medical essays*] are such, that no physician can well be without them’, one local publicist claimed.¹⁴ And it was Linnaeus’s opinion that the *Essays* ‘are for physicians the most excellent proceedings of all the learned Societies’.¹⁵ Almost entirely medical in content, the publications of the Edinburgh Medical Society nevertheless served notice on the learned world that things of tremendous import were happening in the Scottish metropolis. The medical nucleus of Professors Monro, Charles Alston, Andrew Plummer, William Porterfield, and others in the 1730s formed the basis for the later expansion and improvement of science teaching in the University.

With the appointment of the mathematician and Newtonian disciple Colin Maclaurin (1698–1746) to the Edinburgh chair of mathematics in 1725 the University’s rise to non-medical scientific eminence commenced. Maclaurin’s considerable intellectual breadth and unflagging organizational energy made him a central actor in the local scientific enterprise. A close friend of Monro, Maclaurin realized when Monro was taken seriously ill in 1736–7 that something must be done to preserve the University’s scientific society from total dissolution. By this time the Medical Society had become virtually moribund, but Professor Maclaurin saw an opportunity not only to rescue the organization but significantly to expand it and to enhance its prestige. His idea was to transform the Medical Society into a general literary and scientific forum, involving not just the University professoriate but also literati from the professional and landed classes. This conjunction of landed literati and the professoriate was to be of the greatest significance for the later career of scientific organizations in eighteenth-century Edinburgh. The professors would benefit from the patronage and approval of their social superiors; the prestigious

¹² H. D. Erlam, ‘Alexander Monro, primus’, *University of Edinburgh journal*, xvii (1955), 77–105 (87). This article includes a publication of a MS. ‘Life of Dr Ar. Monro Sr. in his own handwriting’, which is now in the Library of the University of Otago Medical School, New Zealand.

¹³ There were five volumes of the *Medical essays*, published from 1733 to 1744. The fifth, and apparently the last, British edition was printed in Edinburgh in 1771. French and German translations were made and part of the *Essays* appeared in other languages.

¹⁴ ‘A life of the celebrated Dr. Monro, late Professor of Anatomy in the College of Edinburgh’, *The Edinburgh magazine and review*, i (1773–4), 302–7, 337–43 (339).

¹⁵ Linnaeus to John Walker, 22 February 1762, Edinburgh University Library [EUL] MS. La. III. 352.

lawyers and gentry would have an opportunity of basking in the reflected glory of the Edinburgh Enlightenment. And the control of Edinburgh culture was delivered into the hands of benevolently traditional elements of society.

Maclaurin intended that the proposed Edinburgh 'Society for Improving Arts and Sciences, and particularly Natural Knowledge' should encompass 'all the Parts of natural Knowledge and the Antiquities of Scotland'.¹⁶ The 'Philosophical Society', as the new organization was more economically called, was designed to have a much broader intellectual and social base than its medical predecessor. From the outset in 1737 the Philosophical Society's leaders were determined to ally the 'professional' pursuit of natural knowledge with a powerful local nexus of patronage. Its first regulation stipulated that 'the Society . . . shall consist of 45 members, one third of whom, at least, shall be *Gentlemen who do not make Philosophy or Physick their particular Profession*'.¹⁷ Far from representing a professional tendency to isolate and insulate an esoteric body of natural knowledge, the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh was a vehicle self-consciously designed to make the patrons of science sensitive to the range of social, cultural and economic benefits which might be seen to flow from science in its various forms.

Where the Medical Society's membership consisted exclusively of medical practitioners and professors, the Philosophical Society recruited from a wider, and more prestigious, social spectrum. Its first President was James Douglas, 14th Earl of Morton (1702–68), a great Scottish landowner, Representative Peer in the House of Lords, and, from 1760, Lord Clerk Register of Scotland. Lord Morton was not only a noteworthy amateur of astronomy, publishing several papers in the *Philosophical transactions* of the Royal Society of London, but also an important patron of science. He was one of the first Trustees of the British Museum, a Commissioner of the Board of Longitude which prepared for the observations of the transit of Venus in 1769, and, most importantly, President of the Royal Society of London from 1764 to 1768.¹⁸

Although the bulk of the scientific work of the early Philosophical Society was in fact carried on by University medical professors (men like

¹⁶ Erlam, *op. cit.* (12), p. 88. In fact, the study of Scottish antiquities seems not to have occupied any significant portion of the Society's time. Only one article in the three volumes of its published proceedings dealt with antiquarian material; see Shapin, *op. cit.* (8), p. 117.

¹⁷ *Transactions of the RSE. General index to first thirty-four volumes. (1783–1888)* (Edinburgh, 1890), pp. 22–6 (22); 'Two original letters from Professor Mac-Laurin to his friend Dr. Johnston[e], Professor of Medicine in the University of Glasgow, giving an account of the institution of the Physical [sic] Society of Edinburgh, in 1737–8', *Scots magazine*, lxvi (1804), 421–3 (421).

¹⁸ Biographical sources for the Earl of Morton include: *The dictionary of national biography*; William Anderson, *The Scottish nation* (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1860–3), iii, 209; C. R. Weld, *History of the Royal Society* (2 vols., London, 1848), ii, 23–6. According to Maclaurin, the Earl of Morton was an 'ordinary', not an 'honorary', member of the Philosophical Society and as such presumably took his turn in reading an original scientific paper to the group. As the Society's minute-books are lost, one has to infer its activities from published records and biographical sources for prominent members.

the Alexander Monro's, *primus* and *secundus*, Andrew Plummer, and Charles Alston), a significant representation of Scottish landowners and lawyers succeeded in making their influence felt.¹⁹ An attentive audience of improving landowners in the Society, among whom were the Earls of Hopetoun and Lauderdale and Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, Bt., stimulated the scientific professors to argue the connexions between the progress of natural knowledge and the economic development of Scotland. In 1743 Andrew Plummer, the Professor of Chemistry and then a secretary of the Society, publicised a scheme which offered improving landowners an opportunity of having their mineralogical samples analysed by competent members:

The society established at Edinburgh for promoting natural knowledge judging it agreeable to the design of their institution, and of general advantage to the country, to encourage the searching for the various kinds of minerals which it produces, . . . [invite] all those who discover any unusual kinds of earths, stones, bitumens, saline or vitriolic substances, marcasites, ores of metals, and other native fossils, whose uses and properties they may not have opportunity of inquiring into themselves, to send sufficient sample of them . . . to the Secretary of the Philosophical Society, Edinburgh; and they undertake to make the proper trials, at the charge of the Society, for discovering the nature and uses of the minerals, and to return an answer to the persons by whom the samples are so sent, if they are judged to be of any use, or can be wrought to advantage.²⁰

There is not space here to detail the distinguished scientific career of the Philosophical Society through the middle part of the century, but there is every reason to suppose that it was outranked only by the Royal Society of London, among British societies, in the quality of its scientific proceedings. In its three volumes of *Essays and observations, physical and literary*²¹ were published Joseph Black's 'Experiments upon *magnesia alba*' and important essays by Professors Maclaurin, Robert Whytt, Andrew Plummer, and the two Monro's. David Hume was at one time its energetic secretary, and its membership through 1782 included James Hutton,

¹⁹ In 1739, 14 of the total membership of 47 were medical men (nine of whom were also professors); there were six advocates, seven peers, and four other titled gentlemen. However, over three-quarters of the articles published in the Society's *Essays and observations* (see note 21) were by medical men. Detailed figures are in Shapin, op. cit. (8), pp. 107, 117.

²⁰ *Scots magazine*, v (1743), 385. In attempting to ally natural knowledge with the agricultural improvement of Scotland, the Philosophical Society was following, on a smaller scale, the lead of the contemporary Society of Agricultural Improvers (note 11). As agriculture, rather than industry, was the dominant economic concern of Lowland improving landlords, the influence of an élite landed audience was frequently manifested in areas seen to be related to the land—agricultural chemistry, horticulture, mineralogy, meteorology, etc. Other Edinburgh examples of the influence of a landed audience for science may be found in the Edinburgh Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Sciences, Manufactures and Agriculture (founded in 1754) and the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland (founded in 1784). A similar relationship between the socio-economic concerns of the audience for science and the themes with which local men of science preferentially deal may be detected in the geological and meteorological focus of the RSE; see Shapin, op. cit. (8), pp. 297–330.

²¹ The first volume of *Essays and observations* was published in 1754, the second in 1756, and the last in 1771, in which year a second edition of the first two volumes was printed.

William Cullen, James Gregory, Adam Smith, John Roebuck, Matthew and Dugald Stewart, and John Walker.²²

The Philosophical Society's vigour in the middle decades of the century rose and fell—after the Jacobite uprising of 1745 its proceedings were suspended for a while. But it always responded to a dynamic leader, someone whose force of personality could impress itself on the membership. Such a leader was Henry Home, Lord Kames of the Court of Session (1696–1782), and the Society's last period of vitality coincided with his presidency.²³ Judge, agriculturist, literatus, philosopher, and anthropologist, Kames's vision of a unified Enlightenment culture in the service of the *improvement* of Scottish letters, philosophy, and the Scottish economy informed his rule of the Philosophical Society and his busy dispensation of cultural patronage. One of Kames's protégés was the young William Cullen. After Kames had been elected Vice-President of the Society in 1752 he wrote to Cullen to remind him 'to contribute to the Philosophical Society, about which I am turned extremely keen now that I have got in a good measure the control of it'.²⁴ He attempted to intercede on Cullen's behalf with the Board of Trustees for the Encouragement of Manufactures to obtain support for a series of experiments on chemical bleaching which Cullen had proposed. And Kames also solicited Cullen's collaboration on a book dealing with agricultural improvement which the lawyer was then planning.²⁵ Holding out the prospect of a £200 fee for the young Glasgow professor, Kames claimed that

It will make a fine Chapter to lay down a plan by which you can thoroughly reconcile profit with ornament and make both go hand in hand, which hitherto never has been dream't of.²⁶

In the hands of men like Kames, scientific patronage and cajolery were effective instruments for turning the never unwilling attentions of men of science to objects of cultural and economic import. In large measure the Philosophical Society was the institutional embodiment of this nexus of patronage; men of science were welcome performers before an audience

²² It is not my intention to present the Philosophical Society as the 'control organization' of the Edinburgh Enlightenment nor natural knowledge as the Enlightenment's dominant concern; neither was the case. Far more characteristic of the organization of culture in Enlightenment Edinburgh, and far more influential, was the Select Society (founded 1754), in which scientific discussion played a minor part; see Roger L. Emerson, 'Social composition of enlightened Edinburgh: the Select Society of Edinburgh 1754–64', forthcoming, and Phillipson, *op. cit.* (4).

²³ Biographical sources for Lord Kames include: Alexander Fraser-Tytler, Lord Woodhouselee, *Memoirs of the life and writings of the Hon. Henry Home of Kames* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1807); Ian Simpson Ross, *Lord Kames and the Scotland of his day* (Oxford, 1972); William C. Lehmann, *Henry Home, Lord Kames, and the Scottish Enlightenment* (The Hague, 1971). Kames became Vice-President of the Philosophical Society about 1752 and President about 1768; he retained the latter office until his death at the end of 1782.

²⁴ Letter from Kames to Cullen, 26 December 1752, in John Thomson, *An account of the life, lectures, and writings of William Cullen, M.D.* (2nd edn., 2 vols., Edinburgh, 1859), i. 75.

²⁵ Ultimately published in 1776 by Kames alone as *The gentleman farmer*.

²⁶ Kames to Cullen, 2 April 1753, National Library of Scotland [NLS] MS. Acc. 3795. Cf. Kames to Cullen, 3 March 1753, NLS MS. Acc. 3892.

that included not only their expert peers but also an appreciative and influential body of potential patrons. Natural knowledge might be legitimated by such an august audience; in turn, natural knowledge could be made to serve the purposes of the élite classes of Enlightenment Edinburgh.

There seemed no reason why the Philosophical Society might not continue its activities unchanged through the 1780s. It was never legally incorporated and it had no Royal Charter, but its membership of between 45 and 60 was generally serious, undoubtedly competent, and usually energetic. However, in 1783 the Philosophical Society was subsumed into a vastly more formal and vastly larger Royal Society of Edinburgh. This transformation, attended by bitter controversy, wide publicity, and deep-rooted cultural conflict, was the direct consequence of the position that natural knowledge had come to occupy in official Edinburgh culture as a whole, and it was particularly the result of the sorts of relations built up between the local scientific performer and the sources of patronage.

Political problems of an Edinburgh career in science

Typically, the controversy which resulted in the founding of the Royal Society of Edinburgh was touched off by an individual scientific career and by the frictions that accompanied an attempt to carve such a career out of the interlocking granite blocks of corporate Edinburgh culture. And, also typically, that career involved a contest for a scientific chair in the University of Edinburgh and the conflict between two distinct groups of potential patrons.

In 1767 a Regius chair of natural history was established in the University.²⁷ Its first occupant was a physician named Robert Ramsay about whom next to nothing is known. Ramsay was to receive £70 per annum from his joint appointment as professor and keeper of the University's Museum of Natural History.²⁸ Principal William Robertson, being advised that the University as yet had no official Museum, petitioned the controlling Town Council to provide rooms for it and to allocate £150 towards its support.²⁹ That the Museum during Ramsay's tenure was too meagre to be of any use in teaching was irrelevant because Ramsay never lectured, treating his post as a complete sinecure. In 1775 Professor Ramsay was taken seriously ill and the manoeuvring for the succession commenced. By the time that he finally died, in December 1778, the fight

²⁷ Only five or six of the twenty-five Edinburgh chairs in the late eighteenth century were Crown appointments; the overwhelming majority of University professorships were in the gift of the Town Council. See J. B. Morrell, 'The University of Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century: its scientific eminence and academic structure', *Isis*, lxii (1971), 158-71 (162-3), and Alexander Grant, *The story of the University of Edinburgh during its first three hundred years* (2 vols., London, 1884), i. 319-20.

²⁸ Grant, *op. cit.* (27), ii. 431-2.

²⁹ Edinburgh Town Council Minutes, 19 June 1765. See also note 61.

for his vacant chair had developed into one of considerable complexity and political significance, the aftermath of which was to be the establishment of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

One of the strongest contestants for the chair was William Smellie (1740–95), the second son of an Edinburgh architect.³⁰ After being educated at the Edinburgh High School, Smellie was apprenticed for seven years to the Edinburgh printing firm of Neill & Co., during which time he also managed to attend the botany and chemistry classes at the University. Strongly attracted to botany, Smellie produced in 1765 an anti-Linnaean *Dissertation of the sexes of plants* and was selected by the Professor of Botany, John Hope, to carry on his classes during his absence. Shortly after this, Smellie set himself up in a partnership as official printer to the University of Edinburgh, receiving financial backing from Professor Hope and Lord Kames. Becoming increasingly serious about a professional career in natural knowledge, Smellie took up the editorship of the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1771 and himself wrote about fifteen of the scientific articles. By the mid-1770s he was engaged in the great work of rendering Buffon's natural history into English for the first time. But for an Edinburgh man with scientific ambitions who had no independent means there was only one recognized culmination of a career in natural knowledge, and Smellie set about attaining it: from 1775 he devoted his energies to securing the Edinburgh chair of natural history.

Another man was also drawn to the same conclusion about his scientific career—John Walker (1731–1803), the son of an Edinburgh grammar school rector.³¹ Educated for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, Walker was impelled to the study of natural history while still a divinity student at the University of Edinburgh. He was inducted into his first parish, that of Glencorse near Edinburgh, in 1758 and, in the same year, made the acquaintance of that great patron Lord Kames. Transferred to the parish of Moffat in Dumfriesshire in 1762, Walker maintained both his botanical interests and his contacts with Kames. In 1764 and again in 1771 Kames secured for Walker appointments from the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in Scotland to undertake surveys of the natural history of the Scottish Highlands and the Hebrides.³² These expeditions, commissioned with the ultimate aim of civilizing and developing those parts of the country, provided Walker with a firm

³⁰ Not to be confused with William Smellie (1697–1763), author of treatises on midwifery. The best source for Smellie's life (and also valuable for insight into Edinburgh scientific life in general) is Robert Kerr, *Memoirs of the life, writings, and correspondence of William Smellie, F.R.S.[E.] and F.A.S. [Scot.]* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1811).

³¹ Biographical sources for Walker include: 'Biographical introduction', in Harold W. Scott (ed.), *John Walker's 'Lectures on geology'* (Chicago, 1966), pp. xvii–xlvi; George Taylor, 'John Walker, D.D., F.R.S.E., 1731–1803', *Transactions of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh*, xxxviii (1959), 180–203; Harold W. Scott, 'John Walker's lectures in agriculture (1790) at the University of Edinburgh', *Agricultural history*, xliii (1969), 439–45; *The dictionary of national biography*.

³² Posthumously published in Edinburgh in 1808 as *Economical history of the Hebrides and Highlands of Scotland* (2 vols.).

grounding in the botany, zoology, geology, and mineralogy of Scotland. Once more a scientific career had been advanced owing to patrons' concern with the improvement of the Scottish nation.

It was also during his early years at Moffat that Walker began to correspond with Linnaeus and to take an active share in the proceedings of the Edinburgh Philosophical Society.³³ Although he managed to publish two papers on natural history in the *Philosophical transactions*, it became clear to Walker that there was an irreconcilable conflict between his pastoral duties in Moffat and the advancement of his scientific career in Edinburgh, inconveniently located about sixty miles to the north. For Walker, as for Smellie, there seemed to be only one starting point for the construction of a serious career in science—the Edinburgh chair of natural history.

As early as 1774 Smellie had begun to establish his credentials for the chair. His patron Lord Kames had proposed that Smellie should 'deliver a series of Discourses or Lectures on the Philosophy and General Economy of Nature, leaving the regular treatment of it as a technical science, especially in its systematic arrangement and nomenclature, to the public professor', i.e. the sinecurist Robert Ramsay.³⁴ Far from incurring the professor's disapproval, the Kames-Smellie project met with his active encouragement, but, interrupted by the work of translating Buffon, Smellie had not yet completed preparations for the lecture series when the actual contest for the vacancy commenced the following year.

The contestants began gathering their forces, giving particular care to the selection of patrons. In retrospect, Smellie's choice of patrons was unfortunate. He attached his hopes for the chair to the waning Whig power structure in Edinburgh and especially to Sir Laurence Dundas, then M.P. for the city, and his son Thomas Dundas, M.P. for Stirlingshire. Although it was said of Sir Laurence in the mid-1770s that he had 'the disposal of almost everything [in the way of patronage] in Scotland',³⁵ he was soon to come into vain conflict with the rising Tory faction of Henry Dundas (no near relation) and the Duke of Buccleuch. Through his father, Thomas Dundas thought that he might easily influence Lord North's administration to appoint his man Smellie. Some of the reasons for Thomas Dundas's enthusiasm in the cause are revealed in a letter written to him by Sir John Dalrymple, then an Edinburgh advocate and shortly to become Baron of the Exchequer:

I wrote to you formerly about Dr Ramsays professorship of Natural History. Smellie, besides being very able for the business, has this advantage, that he lives close in Edinburgh [unlike Walker], is much liked, and has a

³³ Walker sponsored Linnaeus's election as honorary member of the Philosophical Society, apparently over the violent resistance of anti-Linnaean members. See the correspondence between Linnaeus and Walker, January-October 1762, in EUL MS. La. III. 352.

³⁴ Kerr, *op. cit.* (30), ii. 88-9.

³⁵ Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The history of Parliament: the House of Commons, 1754-1790* (3 vols., London, 1964), ii. 360.

sagacious insinuating address, which may make him useful to you in your politics; and he will go through fire and water to do anything I bid him, provided it is not wrong.³⁶

John Walker's battle strategy was to proceed initially through Lord Kames as an intermediary. But Smellie had gained Kames's ear first, and there are indications (see note 39 below) that by early in 1775 the judge had written to Lord Suffolk on Smellie's behalf.³⁷ Suffolk's reply to Kames's enquiry was that he had given the disposal of the chair to Thomas Dundas. However, matters apparently did not stay that way, and, while contestants and their patrons thrust and counter-thrust, Professor Ramsay inconveniently lingered on. By 1778, when Ramsay's demise seemed more imminent, other combatants had entered the lists and affairs became more complicated. Just how complicated is indicated by a letter written from Kames to Walker early in 1778:

My Dear Sir,

Your letter grieves me to the heart. Had it been known that you would have accepted of Ramsay's office, I am confident it would have been yours against all the world. No person would have had confidence to stand in opposition. But there have been intrigues and solicitations going on about it, I know not how long. A private bargain is talked of between him [i.e., Ramsay] and Doctor [Professor John] Rutherford's son [Daniel] for no less than £700, to be his successor.³⁸ Doctor [William] Cullen told me a few nights ago that he had a view for it to his own son [Henry]; but that he thought himself too late, and would not apply. I think myself particularly unlucky in having applied for another man³⁹ chiefly in opposition to the infamous bargain mentioned, which if given way to, will render all our literary productions venal. At the same time, if you can make any interest, I shall be very glad to leave the field open to you. Can you prevail on Lord Hopetoun [John, 2nd Earl of Hopetoun] to solicit for you? I am sure he has a fruitful subject. Beside the advantage to preferring any of his dependents to the Church of Moffat. I am certain Lord Suffolk would be entirely your friend were matters properly represented to him.

If you are disappointed, which I am afraid will be the case, blame none but yourself. Had you announced the natural history of Scotland [see note 32], and published part of it, according to my repeated solicitations, all the world would have been for you; you would not have had a single competitor. Take a hint to what is past: proceed to your publication; and then you will be prepared for what may cast up.⁴⁰

From this it seems probable that Kames had abandoned his earlier support of William Smellie. How the final battle of patrons was drawn up

³⁶ Kerr, *op. cit.* (30), ii. 94.

³⁷ Lord Suffolk was Secretary of State from 1771 to 1779 and a leader of the Grenville Whigs. In October 1779 he was succeeded as Secretary of State by Lord Stormont.

³⁸ It was fairly common for an Edinburgh professor to 'sell' the succession to his chair. Although the professorship was given for life, a current holder might arrange with a new man to take over teaching duties as 'joint professor', in the expectation that he would obtain the full appointment on the death of the older man.

³⁹ This almost certainly refers to Smellie. Lord Kames was not incapable either of dissimulation or of confusion in matters of patronage. It was always a delicate business where the interests of so many minions were involved.

⁴⁰ Kames to Walker, 2 February 1778, EUL MS. La. III. 352/4.

is uncertain; it may have been that Thomas Dundas's power had declined or it may have been that the Earl of Hopetoun's weight with the Administration was sufficient, but, in the event, Walker was the successful candidate. His commission as Regius Professor of Natural History and Keeper of the Museum in the University of Edinburgh dates from 3 November 1779.⁴¹

But still the proprietorship of natural history in the city of Edinburgh was far from settled. So long as Walker's ministerial charge was in Moffat, and so long as he wished to maintain both professorship and parish, he could not come to Edinburgh to deliver a course of lectures. The situation remained unchanged until 1781; the University of Edinburgh had had a chair of natural history since 1767 but as yet not a single lecture on the subject had been delivered. The recalcitrance of the officially ensconced exponent provided an irresistible opportunity for his defeated former opponent.

Into the breach left by the Revd Professor Walker stepped William Smellie and his new patron, David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan (1742–1829). Lord Buchan was a Scottish aristocrat of considerable wealth, wide education, indefatigable industry, and vanity bordering on the pathological.⁴² Antiquary, agricultural improver, patron of the arts and sciences, and dilettante—he was in many ways a perfect counterfoil to Lord Kames. Equally dedicated to the improvement of all areas of Scottish culture and economy, Buchan, unlike Kames, occupied a position on the periphery of Edinburgh literary life. For Buchan was a vocal Whig, the chief of a family of prominent Whigs, in an Edinburgh increasingly influenced by the arch-Tory alliance of Henry Dundas and the Duke of Buccleuch.

In order fully to understand the intensity of the local institutional conflict that attended the Earl of Buchan's subsequent role we must give some attention to developments in national politics. Not in itself a strictly local factor, national politics nevertheless acquired peculiarly local dimensions as it intruded into Edinburgh cultural life.⁴³ The eight years following the outbreak of the American War of Independence were ones of acute political instability in Britain. Widespread dissatisfaction with the American War, as conducted by Lord North's Ministry, sharpened British political tensions along party-ideological grounds. In addition, feelings were running very high in the late 1770s and early 1780s on the

⁴¹ EUL MS. La. III. 352.

⁴² For the life of the Earl of Buchan, see Alexander Fergusson, *The Honourable Henry Erskine, Lord Advocate for Scotland with notices of certain of his kinsfolk and of his time* (Edinburgh, 1882), pp. 191–206, 477–87; John Nichols, *Illustrations of the literary history of the eighteenth century* (8 vols., London, 1817–58), vi. 489–97; James Gordon Lamb, 'David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan: a study of his life and correspondence' (University of St Andrews Ph.D. thesis, 1963); *The dictionary of national biography*.

⁴³ In this brief sketch of the national and Scottish political scene of the late 1770s and early 1780s I have relied on Henry W. Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Glasgow, 1912), pp. 1–40, and the sources listed in note 45.

subject of Parliamentary and Burgh Reform. The fall of North's Ministry in March 1782 was followed by the accession to power of the Rockingham Whigs, with the Foxites sharing significant power. Not until December 1783 did Britain enter another era of Ministerial stability under William Pitt and his Tory colleagues.

Scottish political life was never particularly vigorous in the eighteenth century. Not since the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 had the cohesiveness of Edinburgh society been seriously threatened by political ideological conflict. But the American War, and the reaction to it, introduced a new intensity of party politics to Scotland and a new level of ideological awareness. Party politics de-stabilized Edinburgh society, 'often excit[ing] angry debates which impaired the pleasures of social life, and weakened the confidence of friendship'.⁴⁴ Into this ideologically charged situation walked the Earl of Buchan. Himself a long-standing advocate of reformed measures for selecting the sixteen Scottish Representative Peers in the House of Lords, Lord Buchan was the elder brother of two of the most influential Whig politicians of Scotland: Henry Erskine, a Foxite Whig, became Lord Advocate for Scotland in the 1783 Coalition Ministry and later became Dean of the Faculty of Advocates before he was turned out of office in 1796 by a Tory rebellion; Thomas Erskine rose to become Lord Chancellor of England.

Ranged against the Foxite Whigs in Edinburgh was the Tory power structure controlled by Henry Dundas (1742-1811), Lord Advocate for Scotland since 1775 and later 1st Viscount Melville.⁴⁵ Unlike Buchan, Henry Dundas was a charming and ingratiating character, personally liked by the bitterest of his political enemies. During his years of service in North's Ministry he had begun to build up a solid Tory empire in Scotland, controlling the majority of the forty-five Scottish M.P.'s and directing a nexus of patronage that reached deep into the military, the East India Company, the legal corporations, the University, and the cultural institutions of Edinburgh. Patronage was the base of Dundas's political power in Scotland, and any threat to his minions might be seen as a threat to his influence. However eccentric the Earl of Buchan might have been, he was the brother of Henry Erskine—Dundas's most formidable rival—and Dundas was obliged to take Buchan's activities very seriously.

Although Lord Buchan's urge was to insinuate himself into the centre of Edinburgh cultural life and to impose his personal stamp upon it, he never came close to succeeding. Seeing that existing cultural institutions afforded him insufficient scope for his designs, Buchan turned to a scheme of his own. In November 1780 he projected the Society of the Antiquaries

⁴⁴ Thomas Somerville, *My own life and times, 1741-1814* (Edinburgh, 1861), pp. 198-9.

⁴⁵ On Dundas, see Holden Furber, *Henry Dundas, first Viscount Melville, 1742-1811* (Oxford, 1931), and Cyril Matheson, *The Life of Henry Dundas, first Viscount Melville 1742-1811* (London, 1933).

of Scotland and presided over its initial meeting at his own house in Edinburgh.⁴⁶ Buchan intended his protégé William Smellie to be one of his closest associates in the new endeavour. Concerned that the cultivation of Scottish antiquities alone would not appeal to the natural historian, Buchan assured Smellie that,

although I know very well that . . . the investigation of the subject mentioned above appears at first to be a little out of your beat; yet . . . it is meant to widen the field of enquiry to pursuits connected with it, whether *natural, moral, or political*.⁴⁷

In Buchan's mind the cultivation of national antiquities was the expression of Scottish patriotic sentiment. The discovery and description of the richness and distinctiveness of the national heritage could secure for Scotland a cultural and historical identity within a polity dominated by the English.⁴⁸ Encouraging the study of Scotland's natural and physical heritage was an integral part of Buchan's cultural nationalism. The Society of Antiquaries' plan to stimulate natural history as a cultural pursuit appropriate to Scottish gentry and professionals was consciously and energetically linked to the economic development of the country and the achievement of economic parity with the English. The Society's involvement with science was also an integral part of its bid to survive as an organization in the highly structured and fiercely clannish world of Edinburgh culture. Buchan's reasons for not confining his Society to antiquarian studies alone were outlined in 1782 by William Smellie:

The penury of Scottish Antiquities, it was thought, would neither afford sufficient scope to the researches, nor gratify the tastes of such a number of men as were necessary to carry the views of the Society into execution. It was likewise considered that the narrowness of the country precluded the practicability of instituting two great and opulent bodies, similar to those of the Royal and Antiquarian Societies of London. Experience had also taught us that private collections, having no provision to protect and render them permanent, must inevitably perish.⁴⁹ Besides, though this branch of the institution has not hitherto been fully unfolded, the donations

⁴⁶ The Earl of Buchan had been considering the sponsorship of such a society for many years, most recently in 1778. See *Discourse, delivered by the Right Honourable the Earl of Buchan, at a meeting for the purpose of promoting the institution of a society for the investigation of the history of Scotland, and its antiquities. November 14, 1778* (Edinburgh, 1778; in NLS). Sources for the history of the Society of Antiquaries include: William Smellie, *An account of the institution and progress of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1782; Part II: Edinburgh, 1784); Kerr, *op. cit.* (30), *passim*; and the minute-book of the Society for its early years, a duplicate copy of which is in the Library of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia.

⁴⁷ Kerr, *op. cit.* (30), ii. 32; my italics. Note that natural history was not *normally* considered to be part of antiquarian studies at the time. For example, the article on 'Antiquities' in the third edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1797) makes no mention of any subject that can be regarded as scientific. The extension of Buchan's Society into scientific spheres has, therefore, to be specially explained in terms of the local cultural and institutional situation.

⁴⁸ The question of the search for a Scottish national identity, as fundamental to the ideological and institutional basis of the Edinburgh Enlightenment, is discussed in Phillipson, *op. cit.* (4).

⁴⁹ This is an allusion to the decayed state of the Sibbaldian and Balfourean natural history collections in the University of Edinburgh; see pp. 21-2 below.

received during the last twelve months show, that *Natural Productions of every kind will form the most numerous, as well as the most ornamental part of our collections.*⁵⁰

The Society of Antiquaries' entry into natural knowledge was an indication that Lord Buchan recognized one of the fundamental conditions for the success of an élite Edinburgh cultural organization. Narrow specialization was not acceptable; a broadly based and influential audience was required—one that could only be attracted if the purposes of the organization were publicly allied with the improving thrust of Edinburgh Enlightenment culture as a whole. Buchan's rejection of specialization, and the Antiquaries' insinuation into 'natural, moral, or political' spheres, constituted a threat to the established institutions of local culture that could not go unchallenged.

The Antiquaries' scientific activities were designed to make the new Society attractive to a wider audience; they were also apparently designed to make the Society appealing to William Smellie, the first Secretary of the Society and one of the few members competent to make serious use of the proposed natural history museum. Smellie's designs for the museum were inextricably linked to his recent failure to obtain the chair of natural history and the control of the University's Museum. His efforts in the new Antiquarian Society were meant to show that he did not regard his defeat by Walker as a final blow to his hopes for an institutionally based scientific career. He would simply substitute a new organizational base for the established one at the University. As newly appointed Keeper of the Antiquaries' Museum, Smellie made strenuous attempts to enlist its landed membership in the cause of natural history. His own reasons for desiring a scientific collection were intellectual and proprietary, but inducements to participation by the gentleman-antiquary in such a scheme had necessarily to be phrased in terms of national improvement and rational amusement. 'A Museum, or repository for the natural productions of Scotland is *the one great object of this Society*', he claimed,

and I have not a doubt but that, with a little exertion by our members, it will soon become, if not the most useful, at least the most ornamental and amusing part of our collections. I therefore wish that it should be recommended to the different members of the Society . . . and particularly to such of them as reside occasionally in the country, to collect, by means of the gun, net, or other engine, all the birds, great and small, which frequent their respective neighbourhoods . . . No gentlemen, I presume, will feel the ardour of their sport impaired from the consideration that his amusement is to be useful to his country, and a high gratification to the Society of which he is a member.⁵¹

Smellie's interest in the Society of Antiquaries as an alternative scientific vehicle to the lost Edinburgh chair was not limited to his plans

⁵⁰ Smellie, op. cit. (46), p. 20; my italics.

⁵¹ Kerr, op. cit. (30), ii. 68–9; my italics.

for a museum. In 1781 the Earl of Buchan offered him the auspices of the Society for a lecture series on the 'Philosophy of natural history'—the same series which had originally been suggested several years ago by Lord Kames. The Revd John Walker, the recently appointed, and as yet non-lecturing, professor, instantly and vehemently objected to this seeming threat to his prerogatives and livelihood. Walker realized that any reputation gained by a competitor in natural history would reduce the basis of his income if and when he took up active lecturing in the University. The actual salary of an Edinburgh science or medical professor was usually very low and could not, of itself, assure a comfortable standard of living. Five medical professors had no salary at all, the professor of anatomy had £50, and the professor of natural philosophy £52.⁵² More important than salary was the class-fee collected from each student, usually of the order of two to three guineas per course. Any diminution in the size of the professor's class, such as might be expected from the activities of a rival, independent lecturer, would therefore be regarded as a serious threat to the professor's livelihood. On 14 September 1781 Professor Walker wrote to Lord Buchan expressing his concern and asserting his proprietary rights:

My Lord,

I received the honour of yours of the 10th inst. concerning Mr Smellie. I find . . . that, under the title of Keeper of the Museum of the Antiquarian Society, his design is to give Lectures on Natural History. I should never object to any person doing this as an individual; but to do it under the protection of a numerous society, containing so many respectable members is what, to be sure, I cannot see without regret. That private teachers, for their own interest, should pursue plans of this sort, is not at all surprising; but surely neither I, nor the University of Edinburgh, merit such an opposition from any public body. In the professorship I am soon to undertake, I have foreseen many difficulties, which I yet hope to surmount; but this indeed would be a new discouragement which I did not expect . . . By engaging in that office, I run the risk, perhaps of some character, but certainly of having my income diminished in serving the public; which, at my time of life, is no very agreeable prospect, and renders me more dependent than ever I have yet been upon the support of my friends.⁵³

The 'many difficulties' Walker referred to were certainly connected with his plans for pluralism; indeed, it was not until 18 July 1782 that he managed to secure a presentation from the Earl of Lauderdale to the parish of Colinton, just south of Edinburgh and conveniently located near the geologically and botanically interesting Pentland Hills.⁵⁴ His first natural history class-list at the University of Edinburgh is dated March 1782.⁵⁵ Walker had been determined to enjoy income from both chair and

⁵² Morrell, *op. cit.* (27), p. 166.

⁵³ Kerr, *op. cit.* (30), ii. 99–101.

⁵⁴ EUL MS. La. III. 352 (documents relating to Walker's presentation to the parish and acceptance by the heritors, 12 September 1782).

⁵⁵ There is a printed class-list for Walker's first natural history course in EUL MS. Dc. 1. 18/9, ff. 62–3; it shows 42 students registered (including, oddly enough, the Earl of Buchan).

parish, and, from this point on, he did so—his parish charge gave him around £100 a year, his chair a £70 annual salary plus three guineas per student per class.⁵⁶

William Smellie also had a career to establish in science and maintained that his proposed lecture series was a free-enterprise endeavour from which no serious harm could befall the public professor. He pointed out that his intentions had been honourable—that the lectures had been conceived long ago under Lord Kames's auspices, before Walker's appointment, and that they were intended to treat the 'Philosophy and General Economy of Nature' and not 'Natural History as a science'. It was Smellie's belief that 'from an amicable correspondence, the interests of literature and of the public may be promoted by our mutual labours, which never can interfere'.⁵⁷

Lord Buchan initially stood firm against Professor Walker's opposition and reiterated the patron's position that Smellie might 'if he chuses . . . give Lectures in the Society's Hall, to the members or others, on the philosophy of Natural History and Rural Economy'.⁵⁸ But, encountering unexpected opposition from one of the Society's own members, Buchan began to consider the wisdom of strategic retreat. By 2 October 1781 Buchan agreed that the lectures ought not to be held in the Society's Hall, at least until such time as Walker had actually begun to lecture in the University and had given the public an idea of what scientific ground he was planning to cover. Yet still Lord Buchan maintained his faith in free-enterprise science. 'It is impossible', Buchan claimed, 'to exhaust the almost infinite study of nature; and if Dr Walker shall leave ever so little of that almost boundless subject untouched, it will doubtless be a legitimate object for the ingenuity of Mr Smellie, or any other individual, to expatiate upon and explain.'⁵⁹ Buchan had misjudged the power of proprietorship in Edinburgh science; ultimately the opposition became too strong and Smellie was forced to abandon his plans for a series of lectures on natural history.⁶⁰

If the matter of scientific proprietorship had been temporarily resolved, the issue of scientific property had not. There still remained the question of a natural history museum. By the end of 1781 both the University, under Professor Walker, and the Society of Scottish Anti-

⁵⁶ In the class commencing November 1782 only 23 students were registered. In subsequent years the size of Walker's class varied between 13 and 60.

⁵⁷ Kerr, *op. cit.* (30), ii. 101–4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, ii. 108.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ The first volume of Smellie's *The philosophy of natural history* (presumably based on the projected lecture series) appeared in Edinburgh in 1790; the second volume was published posthumously in 1799. As well as being given the employment of printing it, Smellie received the princely sum of 1,000 guineas for the copyright, said to have been the largest single sum ever given in Edinburgh for a single quarto volume of similar extent; see Hugh Paton (ed.), *A series of original portraits and caricature etchings by John Kay* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1842), i. 207. The contents of Smellie's book seem to lend credence to Walker's fear that the lectures would have conflicted with the University class.

quaries, under Mr Smellie, had claims to the maintenance of a natural history museum. It was this question of the control of scientific and cultural *property*, more than anything else, which broadened the careerist conflict between the two men into a matter of deep concern to the corporate bodies controlling Edinburgh culture. Insofar as the proprietary interests of the University of Edinburgh were concerned, the Society of Antiquaries now faced the enormously influential Principal, William Robertson. Throughout the term of his principalship (1762–93), Robertson vigorously and energetically guarded the rights and prerogatives of his University, making Edinburgh attractive to students, protecting the professors from local opposition, ensuring the value of an Edinburgh degree, and watching over the University's premises. As early as 1765–6 it is evident that Principal Robertson concerned himself with the state of the University's Natural History Museum, obtaining almost £400 from the Town Council for alterations and acquisitions. In 1775 Robertson himself bought curiosities for the Museum from London.⁶¹

The precise control of the University's Natural History Museum in the 1780s was far from clear. It was not until the 1830s that it was finally determined, and then only on the urging of a Royal Commission of Enquiry, whether the contents of the Museum were the personal possessions of the professor of natural history, or whether they belonged, in whole or in part, to the chair, the University, the Town Council, the Crown, or the persons who had donated particular objects.⁶² As late as the mid-1820s Professor Jameson, who had succeeded to Walker's chair in 1804, maintained that certain of the objects deposited in the Natural History Museum might belong to the current occupant of the chair.⁶³

Earlier in the eighteenth century a considerable natural history collection had been assembled and deposited in the University by Sir Robert Sibbald (1641–1722), Professor of Medicine, and Sir Andrew Balfour (1630–94). Badly neglected in the early decades of the century, there was still 'reason to think it was then the most considerable [collection] that was in the possession of any University in Europe'.⁶⁴ Even by 1750 the Sibbald and Balfour Museum remained impressive enough to inspire the young Walker to take up the study of natural history, but soon afterwards it was dislodged from the University's premises and almost completely disappeared. The dissipation of the University's Museum deeply disturbed a number of individuals who had made additional donations of natural history objects, most notably the Earl of Buchan. When Professor Walker

⁶¹ Edinburgh Town Council Minutes, 15 January 1766 and 9 August 1775. See also note 29.

⁶² Anand C. Chitnis, 'The University of Edinburgh's Natural History Museum and the Huttonian-Wernerian controversy', *Annals of science*, xxvi (1970), 85–94 (86).

⁶³ Jameson to Royal Commission, 12 October 1826, in *Evidence, oral and documentary, taken and received by the Commissioners . . . for visiting the universities of Scotland. Volume I. University of Edinburgh* (London, 1837), p. 143.

⁶⁴ John Walker, *Essays on natural history and rural economy* (Edinburgh, 1808), p. 365; cf. pp. 353–5. Also see Grant, op. cit. (27), i. 374–5.

took over the Museum from Robert Ramsay, he said he found 'a large Room allotted for the Purpose in the College', but 'there was really nothing to keep'.⁶⁵ As he described the Museum to the Town Council in 1780,

The great part of it is mere rubbish, that can never be of any use. Some parts of it, particularly many birds and fishes, ought to be immediately thrown out, being so over run with moths and other insects, that no animal preparations can be placed with safety in the room, till they are removed.⁶⁶

However, from very early in his tenure, even before he began lecturing, Professor Walker exerted himself in improving the Museum and turning it into an important instrument for teaching and public use. It was especially useful in geology and mineralogy, subjects which had never before been taught systematically in the University. The University's controlling *Senatus Academicus* was soon made aware that the Natural History Museum under Professor Walker was valuable cultural property, to be protected and augmented.

Yet another interested cultural property-owner in Edinburgh was the august Faculty of Advocates. Its distinguished Library housed much besides books and manuscripts. The Advocates' Library was also a repository for Scottish antiquarian objects and past Curators had included scholars of the standing of Thomas Ruddiman, the classicist, and David Hume. The Museum of the new Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland therefore seemed to threaten the proprietary interests of both the University and the Faculty of Advocates. In late-eighteenth-century Edinburgh these two institutions were a formidable combination to defy in any circumstances. And their combined opposition might become particularly bitter when aroused by a cultural outsider of Lord Buchan's stamp.

The affair of the Antiquaries' charter

The immediate occasion for opposition from the University and the Faculty of Advocates was the Society of Antiquaries' plan to obtain a Royal Charter of Incorporation. The significance of such a Charter was in part proprietary and in part political. A Charter from the Crown would legally secure the Society's right to hold corporate property; it would also, more importantly, serve as an outward mark of official countenance. Both aspects of a Royal Charter for the Antiquaries were galling to the established cultural institutions of Edinburgh.

Lord Buchan, an indefatigable letter-writer and audience-seeker, had gained the Administration's ear on the subject of a Charter as early as

⁶⁵ Walker to Lord Advocate Robert Dundas, 2 September 1793, EUL MS. La. III. 352/2.

⁶⁶ Edinburgh City Chambers, McLeod's Bundle 16, Shelf 36, Bay C; quoted in Chitnis, *op. cit.* (62), p. 86.

February 1781,⁶⁷ and from the spring of that year it became generally known that his Society was planning a formal petition for a Royal Charter. The blemish on the Society of Antiquaries to this point was not merely the fact of its institutional transgression; it was also a function of the membership. Men most publicly associated with the Society included outspoken Whigs like Buchan, his brothers Henry and Thomas Erskine, and William Charles Little; they included mining engineers with Welsh accents and dirty hands like John Williams,⁶⁸ and untrustworthy literary functionaries of no particular distinction, like James Cummyng—the Society's Secretary. Politically, the Antiquaries' leadership was a suspect group in the Tory-dominated Edinburgh of the early 1780s. And, socially, it was felt that many of its members fell just below the line which divided gentlemen from other men. But, even more germane to the virulent opposition that the Charter petition elicited, it was widely believed that the Society of Antiquaries was intellectually light-weight and did damage to the image that established Edinburgh culture wished to present to the outside world. Official Edinburgh culture was alarmed that the face turned most publicly to London should wear so grotesque a visage.⁶⁹

On 21 May 1782 the Society of Scottish Antiquaries formally petitioned King George for a Royal Charter. The petition, submitted over the names of Lord Buchan and the Secretary James Cummyng, presented a rather grandiose and optimistic view of the Society's fortunes so far:

[The petition] sheweth . . . that . . . your petitioners . . . formed themselves into a society for investigating antiquities, as well as natural and civil history in general, with a view to the improvement of the minds of mankind, and to promote a taste for natural and useful knowledge; and the success of their endeavours has already far exceeded their most sanguine expectations. Many men, of the first distinction for rank and learning . . . have, by ingenious dissertations, and valuable donations, contributed toward the prosperity of the Society . . . Your Majesty's uniform patronage of the fine arts, and of useful literature, encourages them to hope, that you

⁶⁷ Lamb, *op. cit.* (42), pp. 80–101.

⁶⁸ Williams was the author of the anti-Huttonian *Natural history of the mineral kingdom* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1789). For an account of his life, see Patrick Neill, 'Biographical account of Mr. Williams the mineralogist', *Annals of philosophy*, iv (1814), 81–3.

⁶⁹ Membership lists of the Antiquarian Society are contained in *Archaeologia Scotica; or Transactions of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland*, i (1792); ii (1823); iii (1831). While on the surface the Society's early membership seems eminently respectable, a distinction may be made between active and *pro forma* members. Many men were apparently put on the Society's rolls either unwillingly or without any intention of becoming actively involved with its proceedings: e.g. the Earl of Bute as its titular President. When the University, the Faculty of Advocates, and the Philosophical Society petitioned the Crown to block the Antiquaries' request for a Charter, the professor of Greek, Andrew Dalziel, commented: '[Buchan] has admitted such a number of ragamuffins into the Society of Antiquaries, that the respectable members are resigning very fast, and joining the University and Faculty of Advocates in an application for a Royal Charter for a new Society . . .'; see Andrew Dalziel, *History of the University of Edinburgh* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1862), i. 39–40. In all, six Antiquaries submitted resignations in the period from November 1782 to January 1783—all lawyers, all later to become Fellows of the RSE; cf. note 89. For criticism of the Antiquarian Society's intellectual competence, see *The Yale edition of Horace Walpole's correspondence* (34 vols., New Haven, Connecticut, 1936–66), ii. 261; xxix. 106–7; xxxiii. 365 (and note) and 367–8.

will render the utility of their plan more diffusive, and effectually secure the heritable and moveable property they already possess or may acquire.⁷⁰

But even before the Antiquaries took the step of submitting a formal petition for a charter, it is evident that opposition had been mounting to the Society's aims and ambitions. The clearest indication of such organized opposition may be found in John Walker's personal papers in the Edinburgh University Library; it is a *Proposal for establishing at Edin^r, a society for the advancement of learning and usefull knowledge*. The Proposal is dated 2 March 1782—that is, two and a half months before the Antiquaries' formal petition to the King.⁷¹

In essence, Walker's proposed *Society for the advancement of learning* was the first sketch for what was to become, in the next year, the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Professor Walker's idea was clearly to use the proposed Society to protect his own professional and proprietary interests. His aim was to destroy, or at least to discredit, the Society of Antiquaries and, with it, the rival Museum and the scientific base it might yet provide for a rival lecturer on natural history. His great success was in convincing the University and the Faculty of Advocates to do his work, persuading these powerful cultural corporations that their own interests were threatened along with his own. The affair of the Antiquaries' Charter was the *occasion* for the founding of the RSE; behind the scene was the more basic matter of Professor Walker's livelihood and the security of his scientific career.

The Professor's insight into the forces controlling Edinburgh culture was correct; a new cultural entity, organized around natural knowledge, was guaranteed success only if it could mobilize the established institutions in its patronage and protection. The cultivation of science in Edinburgh was too much bound up with general culture and its control to expect success if it attempted to isolate itself in a specialized organization. And so Walker's proposal was that there should be only one Royal Charter for an Edinburgh literary society of general scope—and it was not to be the Antiquaries' alone. Walker's idea was for an organization including all interested and qualified literati, subsuming, if necessary, part of Buchan's group in the new society. He proposed

That a number of the Members of the University, of the Faculty of Advocates, of the present Philosophical and Antiquarian Societies, and of other Noblemen and Gentlemen, should be united and incorporated by a Charter from the Crown, under the Name of the Royal Society of Edin^r, for the Advancement of Learning and Usefull knowledge.⁷²

⁷⁰ 'Papers relating to the application of the Society of the *Antiquaries of Scotland* for a Royal Charter', *Scots magazine*, xlv (1783), 673–81 (673–4); cited hereafter as 'Charter papers'. Also printed in the *Caledonian mercury* (Edinburgh), 19 May 1783. The MSS. of these papers are in NLS MS. 2617, ff. 54–9.

⁷¹ EUL MS. La. III. 352/1. The MS. is definitely in Walker's hand. See the Appendix to this paper for the full text of the *Proposal*.

⁷² *Ibid.*, point 1.

Walker recommended two distinct classes in the new society: 'the one, for the Prosecution of Philosophy: the other, of Antiquities'. His specifications for the types of cultural activity appropriate to the Philosophical Class are revealing, both of the Professor's own view of the role of natural knowledge in society and of the possible influence of his patron, Lord Kames. The proposed Royal Society was intended to be yet another in the long tradition of Edinburgh 'improving' societies, this time the grandest and the most respectable of all:

The Class for Philosophy should have for its objects, the Sciences of Mathematicks, Physicks, Chemistry, Medicine and Natural History: the Influence of these Sciences, upon the various liberal and mechanical Arts: *especially their Application to the Improvement of the Agriculture, Manufactures and Fisheries of Scotland.*⁷³

Walker's (and Kames's) vision of the role of natural knowledge in the 'improvement' of Scotland was not to be reflected in any significant portion of the RSE's proceedings immediately after its foundation.⁷⁴ But his *Proposal* did formulate an acceptable resolution of the proprietary questions posed by the natural history collection in the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries. The cultural property of the proposed RSE, together with the accumulated property of the subsumed Antiquarian Society, would be allocated among already existing Edinburgh cultural repositories:

Any Bodies relative to the Class of Philosophy, which may come into the possession of the [proposed Royal] Society, [are] to be placed in the Colledge of Edin^r. And any Collections relative to the Class of Antiquities, to be deposited & preserved in the Advocates Library.⁷⁵

The RSE was to be the creature of the University and the Faculty of Advocates; in order to ensure that conflict involving its right to hold cultural property should not arise, the solution was that the RSE should hold no property.⁷⁶

On 26 September 1782 the Shelburne Ministry responded to the petition from the Society of Antiquaries, judiciously referring it to the 'Minister for Scotland'—Lord Advocate Henry Dundas—'to consider thereof, and report his opinion, what may be properly done therein, whereupon his Majesty will declare his further pleasure'.⁷⁷ There is no sure evidence of the King's personal involvement in the matter. On the

⁷³ *Ibid.*, point 4; my italics.

⁷⁴ Only two of the articles in the first seven volumes of the *Transactions of the RSE* (1788–1815) were on technical or agricultural subjects—an accurate reflection of the RSE's proceedings as revealed by its minute-books. See Shapin, *op. cit.* (8), p. 299.

⁷⁵ Walker's *Proposal*, *op. cit.* (71), point 9.

⁷⁶ However, as I shall show in a forthcoming paper, the nature of the property settlement agreed between the new RSE, the University, and the Faculty of Advocates was the effective cause of serious proprietary conflict in the early decades of the nineteenth century. For an account of the problems caused by the disposition of the Huttonian Collection of geological specimens, see Chitnis, *op. cit.* (62), and *Edinburgh evidence*, *op. cit.* (63), pp. 178, 543–4, 619–21.

⁷⁷ 'Charter papers', p. 674.

contrary, there is every reason to suspect that the affair of the Charter was made the responsibility either of Dundas alone, or of Dundas together with Sir James Hunter-Blair (then Tory M.P. for the city of Edinburgh) and a few Tory political colleagues. And there is no reason to suppose that Dundas took the matter at all lightly; in the tense national political climate of the last months of 1782 Dundas, the Lord Advocate, must have been extremely sensitive to any threat to his power base arising, or even seeming to arise, from the Foxite Whigs in Edinburgh. Dundas's power in Scotland depended very heavily on his dispensation of patronage; he was not likely to dismiss as trivial any Edinburgh institutional controversy which, properly managed, might enhance the scope of his patronage and further obligate to him the leading opinion-makers of the city.

Dundas immediately wrote to Lord Buchan enquiring whether he was aware of any objections to a Royal Charter for the Antiquarian Society. Buchan's reply was slightly disingenuous:

With respect to Caveats there are none, on the contrary, the Society having subsisted near two years has met with universal approbation & the countenance of other *chartered* literary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland.⁷⁸

He urged the Lord Advocate to haste, hoping to settle the Charter business before even more concerted opposition could materialize:

The daily acquisition of Property in the Society requiring a chartered form Lord Buchan hopes that the Lord Advocate will be pleased to give such dispatch to the report as the nature of the matter & his . . . [illegible] engagements will permit.⁷⁹

But Dundas had already been active in the matter—and not exactly on the Antiquaries' behalf. Early in October, possibly even before he wrote to Buchan, he had solicited opinion from the Edinburgh professoriate. The Professor of Medicine, William Cullen, then Vice-President of the Philosophical Society and Acting-President during Lord Kames's last illness, mentioned this in a letter to John Walker:

The Advocate [Dundas] intimated to me and Robie [Professor of Natural Philosophy John Robison] last week, that Lord Buchan had applied to the Ministry for a Charter to his Antiquarian Society. Mr Secretary [Thomas] Townshend [leader of the Commons in the Shelburne Administration] had sent down the Application to the Advocate desiring his opinion. Upon mine and Robies representation to the Advocate he seems to be very favourable to your plan of a charter uniting the two Societies but will not take upon himself (alone) either the favouring of that or opposing the other and desires that representations may be made to him of the propriety of either one or the other.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Buchan to Lord Advocate Henry Dundas, 8 October 1782, NLS MS. 2617, ff. 52–3; my italics.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Cullen to Walker, 18 October 1782, EUL MS. La. III. 352/4.

Walker being isolated far away in Moffat at the time, Professors Cullen and Robison took over the major share of the effort to forestall the Antiquaries' Charter. 'Robie and I', Cullen explained to Walker,

are endeavouring to get the Principal [William Robertson] to apply in the name of the University, Mr Clerk [Sir George Clerk-Maxwell] and I in the name of the Philosophical Society and the Curators of the Advocates Library in name of that Faculty. These applications are what the Advocate approves of and if they can be got in any tolerable form I have no doubt of their putting off the Antiquarian Society for some time and till other proper measures can be taken. The Advocate sets out for London tomorrow and our Representations must follow on Monday. Your answer to this cannot come in time for that but write as soon as you can and tell us what you have to advise. I think several other things might be done if you was here but I cannot tell what, because I don't know all the people that you have formerly spoken to on the subject.⁸¹

Dundas, it then appears, was not at all neutral on the matter. In fact he seems at this time to have expressed a marked preference for the organizational plans of his political supporters—the University and the Faculty of Advocates. He was then Dean of the Faculty of Advocates, the University was strongly Tory, and the Erskine family, of which Lord Buchan was the chief, was the leading Whig influence in Scotland. It was not a difficult choice for Dundas to make.

The RSE and the defeat of unofficial culture

By 5 November 1782, at the very latest, Lord Buchan and his Society had been fully informed at the University's opposition to their Charter petition.⁸² Perhaps unwilling to be seen so openly biassed in the public eye, Henry Dundas encouraged a meeting between Principal Robertson and the Earl of Buchan.⁸³ The meeting, intended if possible to effect a reconciliation, was a disaster of epic proportions. An account of it survives in Buchan's letter of a friend who was apparently also present at the scene.⁸⁴ The confrontation commenced with Principal Robertson (the 'Historiographer' to Lord Buchan) producing 'a long Memorial' written by himself and 'tending to show the preference which ought to be given to any Society founded upon a bottom so broad as to take in the Philosophical Society, Faculty of Advocates, Beaux Arts, Belles Lettres, and in short the whole Encyclopaedia . . .'. Righteously offended by what he took as the Principal's hint of coercion, Buchan was now beyond rational persuasion:

The Historiographer seemed to expect that how soon the Antiquarian Society should hear the Sound of the Sackbut of the Historiographer's Veto and the Timbrel of the Lord Advocate's blustering Eloquence the

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Smellie, *op. cit.* (46), p. 5.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 12.

⁸⁴ Buchan to William Charles Little of Liberton, 26 November 1782, EUL MS. Gen. 1429/16. My attention was drawn to this letter by Mr J. B. Morrell of Bradford University.

Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland consisting of near three Hundred Members & possessed of above 1000s of property⁸⁵ should dissolve . . . That the Historiographer Royal should take the lead in a new Omnium Gatherum Society & take for his Colleagues the very learned & modest Lord Treasurer of the Navy [Dundas] and Thirty or forty of their humble Suitors & dependents the Peers & Clergy of Scotland, admitting into the Assembly of the Just & wise such well principled Members of the Present Society of Antiquaries as might be disposed to marshal themselves under the Denomination of Borsers into old Gaelic Fibula & rusty dirks, leaving the care of the musty Records and valuable Books to the Register Office and to the Lawyers' Library.⁸⁶

Having ascended to the level of personal insult (Buchan attributing Robertson's opposition to 'the impotent rage of a disappointed Author'), the Earl asked the Principal 'if he knew by what means his great Plan of a Society was to be brought to bear'. The Principal replied that 'he knew not & saw numberless difficulties, but that at any rate a Charter to a nonexistent Association would be more respectable than our's [the Antiquaries] where there were many Members neither Gentlemen nor men of Erudition'. Adding politics to personal invective, Buchan recalled a cutting riposte he *might* have made:

Sir you know very well that you yourself have neither of these advantages & yet, by your flowery Style and your Apologies for Tyranny and Cruelty, have rendered yourself what is called in Britain an Ornament to your Country.

Returning once more to the crux of institutional conflict, Buchan told Robertson ('this Court Chaplain') 'that the University of Edinburgh had irretrievably lost the Confidence of the People', that it had allowed its natural history collections to be dissipated, and that 'it had set itself up in opposition to every attempt of merit & every Man of merit within the Sphere of its influence'. He informed the Principal that he himself had made natural history donations to the University Museum which he 'had the Mortification to see sold by publick auction of Dr Ramsay's Executors'. The University of Edinburgh had 'lost the Confidence of the Publick in the line of a Museum'—the whole episode illustrating:

a despicable spirit of Despotism prevailing in this County, which wished to damn every Plan of public Utility which was promoted by persons guilty of the greatest Crime which could be perpetrated by the Subjects of the present administration, viz. *Whiggery, that that Crime was hereditary in my family and in those of many of the Antiquaries.*⁸⁷

Robertson was further informed that Buchan 'considered this (i.e. Whiggery) as the real fault of our laudable Association, and that the

⁸⁵ The truth of the matter is that at the end of 1782 the Society of Antiquaries carried fewer than 115 *ordinary* members on its rolls, of whom only a small proportion were at all active. As far as the Society's property is concerned, the MS. leaves it uncertain whether Buchan intended to claim 1,000 shillings or 1,000 pounds. He crossed out the latter and substituted the former. The Society, however, had purchased a house in the Cowgate in 1781 for £1,000.

⁸⁶ Buchan to Little, op. cit. (84).

⁸⁷ Ibid.; my italics.

Antiquaries would Judge for themselves whether it was right for them to disperse like a Vile Mob at the waving of his hand'. 'The Historiographer,' according to Buchan, 'blush'd and grinned a Ghastly Smile'. The Earl went on to impugn the family origins of both Henry Dundas ('the younger Son of a Branch of a Private Family . . . without information, and bolstered by impudence and scurrility') and William Robertson ('an obscure Priest the brother of an obscure Goldsmith in Edinburgh'), to call their colleagues 'a Junto of Jacobites and Tories who insult the best men in [Scotland], and determine the Existence of Literary Societies, Militias, Armanents and Constitutional Rights'.

At one level the exchange between Buchan and the Principal of the University amounts to an amusing clash of strong personalities. The substance of their conflict also makes it quite clear that party political tensions, recently exacerbated in Edinburgh, played a significant role in the battle over the Antiquaries' Charter. Yet party politics alone cannot fully explain the violence of the establishment literati's reaction to Buchan's plans. The fact of the matter was that Buchan was simply not clubbable in an Enlightenment context that put a very high premium on clubbability. His schemes threatened to upset the stability of institutionalized culture in a setting in which institutional stability was valued. Enlightenment culture, and the local institutions in which it flourished, were often seen as means of transcending social and intellectual faction. If faction was injected, or seen to be injected, into the institutional pattern of the Edinburgh Enlightenment, then the whole basis of agreeable and amiable intellectual intercourse might be threatened. What is more, Buchan and the most active of his colleagues in the Society of Antiquaries were felt to be below the standard of intellectual competence expected of the leaders of Enlightenment cultural institutions. It would not have mattered if a coterie of marginal intellectuals had set up their own congregation, for the purpose of conducting private business. But the Antiquarian Society desired *public* recognition, through a Royal Charter, of its status as the equal, or even the superior, of the great Edinburgh societies—the Philosophical and the Select. This institutional hubris, combined with the other factors outlined above, was what could not be tolerated. It was widely felt that the public indiscretion of Buchan's organization might debase the achievements of the Edinburgh cultural renaissance in *English* eyes, and it was partly to prevent such a public indiscretion that the battle against the Charter was waged.

After the failure to attain *rapprochement* with Buchan, Principal Robertson proceeded with his plans to call a meeting of the University Senatus Academicus to formulate an official objection. Neither was the Earl of Buchan idle. Two days after his meeting with William Robertson Buchan played what proved to be his trump card against the University. He wrote to several professors, threatening the University with a Royal

Commission of Enquiry if the Senatus persisted in its opposition to his Society's Charter. Lord Buchan's letter to Allan Maconochie, Professor of Public Law, makes clear what the proposed Royal Commission would do:

If this intended Senatus Academicus should think proper to . . . [enter] a Caveat against the Charter of this respectable and useful Society I am entrusted to inform you that many great, generous and opulent Persons in Scotland are determined to join in an application to his Majesty for a Visitation of the College of Edinburgh. The chief objects of enquiry will be: Whether the rules and orders enjoined by the last Royal Visitation have been observed? Why have the Sibbaldean and Balfoureaan Collections of natural objects, as well as late donations of a similar kind made by myself and others been irrecoverably lost? Why have so many sinecurist Professors from time to time been permitted? In a word it will be the business of this visitation to review the general conduct of the College which must be both troublesome and expensive.

Attempting to align the Antiquaries' aims with accepted Enlightenment cultural values, Lord Buchan went on to regret that

a step of this kind however disagreeable becomes necessary if a University instituted for the promotion of *learning* shall avowedly oppose the progress of *Science* by objecting to the Charter of an association which is now encouraged and protected all over Europe by the Republick of Letters.⁸⁸

Although Maconochie professed his conviction that the University should not 'apprehend Evil or disgrace from a Royal Visitation',⁸⁹ and Professor of Greek Dalzel, the recipient of a similar letter, said that the University would 'rise with redoubled lustre from any scrutiny',⁹⁰ such claims have a touch of bravado about them. A Royal Visitation in the 1780s would doubtless have exposed many of the same abuses of professorial and institutional prerogative which the Royal Commission of 1826 in fact discovered. And the impact would have been too great for the University to ignore such a threat. However personally eccentric the Earl was, and however intellectually trivial he was believed to be, Lord Buchan was the elder brother of Henry Erskine who, by August 1783, was to become Lord Advocate for Scotland in place of Dundas. Buchan's threat to induce a Royal Visitation was, at the very least, credible.

On 30 November 1782 the Senatus Academicus of the University met to consider what ought to be done with regard to the Antiquaries' Charter. Among the fourteen professors (plus the Principal) attending, all six of the scientific and medical professors present were members of the Philosophical Society. Of the two legal professors who attended, one—Alexander Fraser-Tytler—was then one of the four Curators of the Advocates' Library.⁹¹ The University Senate therefore represented an inter-

⁸⁸ Buchan to Maconochie, 28 November 1782, Meadowbank Papers, EUL Mic. M. 1070. I owe this reference to Dr N. T. Phillipson of the University of Edinburgh.

⁸⁹ Maconochie to Buchan, 29 November 1782, *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Dalzel, *op. cit.* (69), i. 40.

⁹¹ 'College minutes, 1733-1790', EUL MS. minute-book of the Senatus Academicus, i. 306-9.

locking directorate of official parties interested in blocking Buchan's Charter. The meeting unanimously carried the Principal's resolution to Henry Dundas opposing the Society of Antiquaries. But Professor Walker urged the Senate more strongly to emphasize the threat posed to his interests, and he suggested

that the injury to the University, by establishing the Society of Antiquaries as a body corporate, would appear more evident if notice were taken in the Memorial of a Scheme which had been formed by that Society in order to appoint a Lecturer upon Natural History in their Museum . . .⁹²

The 'Scheme' had apparently been dropped several years ago but Walker still felt insecure in his position. Professors Robison, Maconochie, and Hunter were appointed to make the appropriate adjustments in the University's Memorial.

One other fundamental change was made in the Senate's representation. In the first draft the University proposed that *all* the property of the new RSE '*shall be deposited in the Museum of the University of Edinburgh* so as both may be most accessible to the Members of the [Royal] Society, to the Publick and of most publick Utility'.⁹³ In the final Memorial the University was persuaded to share the wealth a bit more:

Whatever collection of antiquities, records, MSS. &c. shall be acquired by this Royal Society, shall be deposited in the Library of the Faculty of Advocates; and all objects of Natural History acquired by it, shall be deposited in the Museum of the University of Edinburgh.⁹⁴

No mention was made about who was actually to own the cultural property so deposited by the Royal Society, nor was a set of regulations framed defining rights of use. In the atmosphere of crisis then obtaining, almost any arrangement among trustworthy and respectable men was deemed superior to allowing Buchan's group to divert cultural property to their own Museum.

The University's plan was not for a Royal Society to rival that of the Antiquaries but for one to subsume it and, by so doing, effectively to destroy its independent existence. Scotland, they argued, presented a situation entirely different from 'countries of great extent, . . . where knowledge is much diffused, [and where] a considerable variety of literary societies may be established with advantage, and each pursue its separate object with ardour and success'.⁹⁵ France could support three distinct literary societies and England two—the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries of London—but in Scotland 'the interest of science and literature is more effectually promoted by one general society, which has for its object the various departments of Philosophy, Erudition, and

⁹² Ibid., i. 309–10.

⁹³ Ibid., i. 309; my italics.

⁹⁴ 'Charter papers', p. 675.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 674–5.

Taste'. The Academies of Berlin, Göttingen, and St Petersburg were the stated models—not the more specialized Royal Society of London.

The Philosophical Society moved into action shortly after the University professoriate by which it was dominated. Lord Kames, then its President, was seriously ill—he was to die on 26 December—but the Vice-President, Professor Cullen, took charge of the matter. On 14 December he wrote to Henry Dundas with a Memorial from that group echoing the sentiments of the University. Tactfully, he did not even mention the Society of Antiquaries. It was simply that the Philosophical Society had come to see the need for a Royal Charter of its own. 'The Philosophical Society', according to Cullen, 'have many reasons for desiring to be formed into a body corporate, and particularly for the purpose of legally holding property, in which, for want of a proper constitution, they have formerly suffered a considerable loss'.⁹⁶ The Philosophical Society hoped, by expanding the audience for science, 'to reap the advantages of a more general communication of knowledge than their present institution can promise'.⁹⁷

The third element of the official cultural triumvirate—the Faculty of Advocates—acted early in December. The four advocates who then held positions as Curators of the Library (including Professor Fraser-Tytler) wrote to Dundas protesting at the damage which the Antiquaries might do to the Faculty's collection of antiquities.⁹⁸ The Curators claimed that a rival collection of national antiquities was 'not only unnecessary but inexpedient', yet asserted that the Royal Society proposed by the University and the Philosophical Society would not 'interfere in any degree' with the Advocates' Library.

By December 1782 opposition to the proprietary ambitions of the Antiquaries had crystallized into a plan for a grand and all-inclusive Royal Society of Edinburgh. A scheme put forward by such powerful cultural organizations seemed unstoppable. Indeed, opposition to the Royal Society (and to forestalling the Society of Antiquaries) *within* the University, Philosophical Society, and Faculty of Advocates was negligible. What little there was arose in the Faculty of Advocates. On 25 January 1783 Henry Erskine (Whig advocate and brother of the Earl of Buchan) protested that the caveat entered by the Curators against the Antiquaries' Charter had been submitted without the knowledge of the entire Faculty.⁹⁹ He therefore requested a plenary meeting to evaluate

⁹⁶ Thomson, *op. cit.* (24), ii. 219. There is, however, no reason to believe that any such loss to the Philosophical Society actually occurred; this lends additional support to the view that the purpose of a Royal Charter for Buchan's opponents had more to do with institutional prerogative than with the legal protection of endangered cultural property.

⁹⁷ 'Charter papers', p. 676.

⁹⁸ Curators of the Advocates' Library [Alexander Abercromby, Robert Blair, Ilay Campbell, Alexander Fraser-Tytler] to Lord Advocate Henry Dundas, 3 December 1782, *ibid.*

⁹⁹ 'Minutes of the Faculty [of Advocates], 1751–1783', NLS MS. FR 2, p. 514. Used by permission of the Clerk of Faculty.

the Curators' action. But at that meeting, on 8 February, the assembled advocates 'were unanimously of opinion that the Conduct of the Curators was highly proper, and showed great attention to the Interest of the Faculty'.¹⁰⁰ So far the Faculty had determined only that the Curators' action was justified—not that it wished finally to oppose the Society of Antiquaries. A motion was then made by Robert Cullen (the eldest son of Professor Cullen) urging resolute opposition to the Antiquaries' Charter and advising the Vice-Dean of the Faculty and the Curators to remonstrate again with Dundas that no Royal Charter be granted to any literary society harmful to the Advocates' interest.¹⁰¹ A contrary motion, put by a member of the Antiquaries, requested that the Faculty authorize no opposition to Buchan's Charter. Robert Cullen succeeded in doing his father's work; the motion opposing the Society of Antiquaries was carried by 38 to 12, with five abstentions.

Early in January 1783 the Lord Advocate transmitted to the Society of Antiquaries copies of the Memorials addressed to him from the University, the Philosophical Society, and the Faculty of Advocates.¹⁰² The Antiquaries drafted a vigorous reply, defending the propriety of their Charter request and pointing out that the nature of the opposition strongly suggested conspiracy.¹⁰³ In particular, the Society focused on the University's insistence that Scotland could not support more than one public literary society. Scotland, they noted, currently supported four universities, at least two of which were capable of rivalling the two English universities. 'It is not', they said, 'the narrowness of the country, but the want of liberality . . . and the little jealousies originating from party-views and personal antipathies, which have unfortunately prevented this country from establishing literary societies like those of Italy, France, England, and many other nations of Europe'.¹⁰⁴ Dismissing as self-serving the concern expressed by the University about a rival lectureship in natural history, the Antiquaries acidly noted that 'it is not impossible that professors may be admitted into the University, who are either indolent, or whose parts are not remarkably brilliant. In cases of this kind, a rival lecturer may be of the greatest utility to his country'.¹⁰⁵

By this time Dundas had heard all he wished to hear from the Society of Antiquaries. He and Sir James Hunter-Blair returned to London, taking the matter under advisement. Contacting Principal Robertson, they informed him that the University's Memorial had been presented to the King's Ministers and that they 'had good reason to think that what was requested in the aforesaid Memorial would be granted'.¹⁰⁶ But, in order to

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 520–1.

¹⁰² Smellie, *op. cit.* (46), p. 12.

¹⁰³ 'Charter papers', p. 677.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 678.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 679.

¹⁰⁶ 'College minutes', *op. cit.* (91), i. 311–12 (meeting of 10 February 1873).

obtain the Charter for the proposed Royal Society of Edinburgh, a formal petition must be presented to the King from the Principal and the professors. The formal petition now drawn up omitted any mention of the Society of Antiquaries and requested only the incorporation of a 'Royal Society of Edinburgh for the advancement of learning and usefull knowledge', the Fellows of which were to be empowered to investigate and discuss 'not only the Sciences of Mathematicks, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Medicine, and Natural History, but those relating to Antiquities, Philology and Literature'.¹⁰⁷ Along with this 'general and respectfull' petition to the King, the Senatus thought it advisable to send a more detailed Memorial to Dundas and Hunter-Blair, specifying the desired form and structure of the Royal Society.¹⁰⁸ The University expressed itself willing to have the Crown, presumably through Henry Dundas, nominate not only the President of the Society but also the original Fellows. It was an offer which seemed impossible to refuse.

On 23 March 1783, in the midst of the national political crisis attending the resignation of the Shelburne Ministry, Dundas wrote to the Earl of Buchan informing him that he had decided to recommend the Antiquaries' petition for a Royal Charter to the King.¹⁰⁹ Having considered both the caveats and the Antiquaries' reply, Dundas had concluded that 'there is nothing illegal in the objects of the Society. On the contrary, their views and intentions seem meritorious.' Both Charter requests—that for the Antiquaries and that for the Royal Society of Edinburgh—were submitted to the King for his signature on 29 March and passed the Privy Seal on the same day. On 6 May 1783 the two Charters were extended under the Great Seal in Edinburgh. The city now had two general literary societies under Royal Charter—one, without doubt, far more Royal than the other.¹¹⁰

In the absence of definitive documentary evidence, it must remain uncertain why the Antiquaries' enemies were unable, or finally unwilling, to block Buchan's corporate ambitions. There were probably several contributory factors. It may well have been that, in the political context of the spring of 1783, Dundas felt that he was in a somewhat shaky position. As Lord Advocate in a Government which, from 2 April, included Fox, Dundas could have been reluctant to expend too much political capital in opposing the wishes of Henry Erskine's brother. It may also have been the case that the University professoriate, the Philosophical Society, and the Faculty of Advocates felt sufficiently sure of the cultural pre-eminence of their proposed Royal Society that they could cease worrying about the proprietary pretensions of the lesser organiza-

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, i. pp. 312–13.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, i. 314–15.

¹⁰⁹ Smellie, *op. cit.* (46), p. 29, and Kerr, *op. cit.* (30), ii. 39–40.

¹¹⁰ The Society of Antiquaries did not incorporate the word 'Royal' into its name, although its 'members' were transformed into 'Fellows' upon receipt of the Charter.

tion. Certainly, hindsight would have proved them right. However, in the final assessment, one must point to Lord Buchan's threat to cause a Royal Visitation of the University. Only after Buchan had made his threat did the University drop all mention of opposing the Antiquaries' Charter and concentrate on the institution of its own society. A Royal Visitation would have been, at the least, inconvenient and was certainly a development to be avoided if at all possible. In the early months of 1783 it was generally recognized in Edinburgh that Henry Erskine stood a chance of succeeding Dundas as Lord Advocate. If he did so, and if he attained power in a situation where his elder brother had reason to be embittered, then a Visitation of the University was not beyond the question.

Decline and reconciliation: the early career of the Society of Antiquaries

As may have been expected by the University, the Faculty of Advocates, and the Philosophical Society, the founding of the RSE seriously undermined the cultural position of Lord Buchan's Society of Scottish Antiquaries. From the outset the RSE was institutionally secure; its finances were sound, the quality of its proceedings generally high, its meetings regular and reasonably well attended. In the face of such formidable competition as the RSE provided, the Society of Antiquaries was soon in danger of collapse. There were twenty-one papers communicated to the Antiquarian Society in 1782—the year before the RSE was founded—ten in 1789, and only one each in 1794 and 1795. There was a spurt of activity again in the late 1790s, but the Society's darkest hours were yet to come—from 1802 to 1815, when it existed in little more than name. Having admitted more members than wished to pay their subscriptions, the Antiquaries' proprietary designs soon encountered financial restraints. Shortly after their founding the Society had purchased a house in Edinburgh's Old Town, Lord Buchan providing security. It was unable to complete payment on the house from members' subscriptions, and a sad row ensued in which the Earl of Buchan, less than ten years after founding the Society, resigned.¹¹¹ Fresh calamities befell the Antiquaries in 1793 when, on the death of its Secretary, James Cummyng, many of the articles in the house—the objects which had been at the centre of the Charter controversy—were disposed of along with his personal possessions.¹¹²

A period of retrenchment followed in which the Antiquaries attempted without success to impose on the entirely nominal patronage of the King for the sum of £100 a year to tide them over hard times. Scientific and, indeed, antiquarian activities of any kind lapsed and the energies of the few active members focused on preventing the demise of the whole enter-

¹¹¹ S[amuel] Hibbert and D[avid] Laing, 'Account of the institution and progress of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, part III, 1784–1830', *Archaeologia Scotica*, iii (1831), Appendix, v–xxxi (vi–xi).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii.

prise during a period in which the Society had far more office-holders than actual participants. From 1810 to 1815, one of the liveliest periods in the career of the RSE, the Society of Antiquaries had but five meetings, and at four of those the only recorded business was the reading of the previous meeting's minutes. The RSE, by 1810 grandly established in the New Town, looked proudly out on the Old Town Antiquarian Society—little recalling the bitter conflict of 1782–3.

Indeed, so far was their enmity forgotten that, when the Antiquarian Society surged into life again in 1815, it was largely through the efforts of active Fellows of the RSE.¹¹³ The Antiquaries' Museum was taken to the New Town and lodged in rooms directly above those occupied by the RSE. By 1820 the same man, James Skene of Rubislaw, acted as the Curator of both the Antiquaries' and the RSE's Museums, and by 1826 Thomas Allan, an Edinburgh banker and geologist, acted as Treasurer of both institutions. In 1829, all passion long since spent, the Museums of the RSE and the Antiquarian Society were cooperatively rearranged—all natural history objects in the Antiquaries' possession being transferred to the RSE and all antiquarian objects in the RSE's Museum being moved to the Society of Antiquaries' rooms. The local institutional politics of natural history and antiquarian studies had once more reached an equilibrium.

Conclusion: the cultural image of organized science

As I have attempted to demonstrate, the establishment of the RSE in 1783 was the result of a complex nexus of local political, social, and institutional forces—some of which related to the place of science in Edinburgh culture, and some of which had nothing at all to do with the scientific enterprise *per se*. Although it was originally founded to cater for intellectual activity across the entire spectrum, with equal 'Physical' and 'Literary' classes, the RSE, by the early years of the nineteenth century, had developed into an almost exclusively scientific organization—one of the most distinguished of its kind in Britain. As the RSE was the 'control organization' for Edinburgh general science, local attitudes to the Society were bound to intersect at some point with a deeply rooted image of 'the scientific community' which was prevalent throughout Britain at the time. The early constitution of the RSE and the local attitude to the Society were both intimately related to the political circumstances of its founding. The Society's pre-history, as related above, crucially influenced its administration, its membership, and the image which organized science presented to the rest of Edinburgh society.

Having obligated themselves so completely to Henry Dundas and the Tory oligarchy in Edinburgh, the projectors of the RSE were obliged

¹¹³ Ibid, p. xvii. These Fellows included Sir Henry Jardine, Revd John Jamieson, Sir George Stewart Mackenzie, and Thomas Allan.

to recognize their patrons in some formal and significant manner. At the Society's first general meeting, held in the College Library on 23 June 1783, Dundas, the Lord Advocate, was unanimously elected to Fellowship and to the Vice-Presidency of the RSE, which office he held until his death in 1811. Dundas was also appointed to the committee that had responsibility for examining submitted historical papers.¹¹⁴ Dundas's Tory political colleague, Henry Scott, 3rd Duke of Buccleuch (1746–1812), was made the Society's first President—a selection possibly influenced by his family relationship to Thomas Townshend who had been instrumental in managing the Charter petition in London. Neither Dundas nor the Duke of Buccleuch were ever more than marginally active in the RSE's intellectual proceedings, but their presence for almost thirty years among the Society's office-holders conspicuously aligned the institution with the Tory centre of Scottish political power.¹¹⁵ This circumstance made the RSE's political position rather comfortable during the British reaction to the French Revolution, when a number of other provincial scientific societies came under strain and suspicion owing to the Republican sympathies of many of their leading members.¹¹⁶

The Fellowship of the original RSE represented a cross-section of the Scottish political and cultural power-wielding élite. Far larger than the sixty-strong Philosophical Society (which, with the exception of Lord Buchan, was totally subsumed into the new organization), the RSE's founding ordinary Fellowship of 165 included all the professors of the University of Edinburgh, most of the professors of the other Scottish universities, the majority of the Senators of the College of Justice, the Barons of the Court of Exchequer, the leading advocates and Writers to the Signet of Edinburgh, the most eminent ministers of the Church of Scotland, a large number of fashionable and erudite medical men, and a generous leavening of politicians, peers, and Lowland landed gentry. Owing to the political circumstances of its chartering, the RSE was bound to be at its inception very much an *ex officio* society, admission to its ranks being gained by status and not necessarily by intellectual achievement.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ 'Minutes of General Meetings of the RSE from its institution, June 23 1783, to July 6 1791' (minutes for meetings of 23 June 1783 and 17 July 1784).

¹¹⁵ It was the Duke of Buccleuch who had technically submitted the Charter petition to the King. See 'The report of His Majesty's Advocate for Scotland upon the petition of Henry Duke of Buccleuch', Public Record Office, London, S.P. 37, 27. Buccleuch attended only two early meetings of the RSE and submitted a meteorological register for publication in the first volume of the Society's *Transactions*. For details of his life, see William Fraser, *The Scotts of Buccleuch* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1878), i. 489–501.

¹¹⁶ Cf., for example, the effect of the Priestley Riots on the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. See Thackray, op. cit. (2).

¹¹⁷ At the RSE's first general meeting it was decided to offer Fellowship to the ranking members of the legal profession and the professors of each of the Scottish universities. But, apparently because of a concern about the long-term effects of *ex officio* Fellowship, 'it was especially provided that this assumption shall not be considered as extending to their Successors in Office'. Although the RSE's Fellowship extended far into the upper reaches of Scottish society, its most active intellectual performers tended to be recruited from the Edinburgh literati's usual social roles—the university professors, the learned surgeons and physicians, the erudite lawyers, and the self-improving, modern-minded landlords.

The early RSE was neither a young man's society nor unduly sympathetic to those who had yet to make their intellectual mark. This was a feature of the organization which, in some quarters of Edinburgh society, conflicted with an image of the 'Republic of Science'. In the minds of many of late-eighteenth-century Edinburgh's bright and ambitious young, the scientific enterprise, of all others, ought to be open and egalitarian, run on meritocratic lines and unburdened by the weight of established authority. Intolerant of arbitrary intellectual authority, the scientific enterprise and scientific societies ought, according to this conception, to be independent of arbitrary political and social forces. The scientific modelling of a liberal society on an image of the scientific community was offended that science should be incorporated, and especially that it should be incorporated in such a way as in the early RSE. But the RSE could not escape its history. Conflict between the scientific image and the actual nature of the Society was inevitable.

Among those Edinburgh literati who were not then included in the RSE, the 27-year-old John Leslie (later Professor of Mathematics and of Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh) was particularly disenchanted with the organization. A Whig who sympathized with the French Revolution, Leslie wrote to his friend and patron Thomas Wedgwood in 1793:

I am determined from principle to have no connection with these incorporations, called Royal Societies . . . I detest the spirit of intrigue and patronage and jealousy which infests every constituted body.¹¹⁸

Disappointed by the failure of the RSE to publish one of his scientific papers, Leslie remarked:

If I much heeded the proceedings of Incorporated Juntos, I have received enough to mortify me . . . It fills one with indignation to see the littleness of these titled men of science and the monopolizing spirit which actuates them . . . I confess that I am disgusted with the coarse despotic tone of sentiment that prevails among the leading men [in Edinburgh], and mortified at the servility and political tergiversation which the literati have so generally betrayed.¹¹⁹

Robert Forsyth (1766–1845), a polymathic Edinburgh advocate of humble social origins, likewise attacked the RSE for its illiberal exclusiveness:

In Edinburgh, there is established . . . a *Royal Society*, which has published some volumes of transactions. It contains a number of members of great respectability: but in Edinburgh men of letters are apt to be extremely

¹¹⁸ Leslie to Wedgwood, 26 May 1793, Wedgwood Papers, Keele University Library, MS. E-241-1. Leslie was elected F.R.S.E. in 1807, two years *after* his controversial election to the Edinburgh mathematics chair.

¹¹⁹ Leslie to Wedgwood, 14 July 1794, 18 August 1797, *ibid.*, MSS. E-244-1, E-259-1. Not all the RSE's critics were Whigs. The arch-Tory John Rotheram (Professor of Natural Philosophy at the University of St Andrews) wrote the Society an acerbic letter in 1799 in which he accused it of being 'managed by a Junto . . . partial to those they can make their tools'. Professor Rotheram, then a Fellow, was instantly expelled; see 'Minutes of the General Meetings & Councils of the RSE, 1798–1807', pp. 11–16.

jealous and unsociable with regard to each other. This illiberality of temper prevents the Royal Society from being of much value. Great numbers of the most accomplished and active men of letters are unconnected with it, while it contains others who have been introduced to it, merely by their rank in the world, or the circumstance of having attained to distinguished literary situations by the patronage of men in power . . .¹²⁰

The Tory bias of the early RSE is significant as a widely shared lay perception, if not as an easily demonstrable fact. Certainly, eminent, if calm and circumspect, Whigs like Professor John Playfair were active and influential Fellows, but it is at least questionable whether they would have been admitted had it not been for their status—as university professors, or, in the case of Lord Daer, son of the Earl of Selkirk, as members of the aristocracy.¹²¹ In 1784 the Whig politician Edmund Burke encountered stiff opposition in his candidacy for Fellowship. Burke was elected, but, as his sponsor Professor Dalzel wrote to a friend, ‘not unanimously; there were several black balls. But this *entre nous*. It would seem that there are some violent politicians among us’.¹²² When the strongly Tory novelist Sir Walter Scott, who claimed to know nothing of science, was elected third President of the RSE in 1820, he wrote to inform the Viscount Melville of the honour. ‘I have’, Scott announced, ‘been chosen President of the Royal Society here which keeps one feather out of a Whig bonnet’.¹²³

By the time Scott became President, most of Edinburgh’s cultural, although not political, feathers were in fact worn in Whig bonnets. The rise of young, middle-class Whigs to cultural eminence had been largely stimulated by the work of the *Edinburgh review* circle: Henry Brougham, Francis Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, Francis Horner, and others. As brilliant young marginal men in the Edinburgh of the mid-1790s, just prior to the founding of the *Review*, they too had their criticisms of the RSE and of incorporated culture in general. Brougham reacted violently against what he and his colleagues saw as the oligarchical and culturally monopolistic RSE. ‘The *Royal Societies*’, Brougham asserted,

are sunk in a sort of *inertia*, or at least are so much ruled by *party*, and what is more by political party, and still worse by *aristocratical* politics,—that their labours are useless to science.

¹²⁰ Robert Forsyth, *The beauties of Scotland* (5 vols., Edinburgh, 1805–8), i. 60.

¹²¹ I have compiled a short list of those proposed for Fellowship and subsequently rejected. The list seems to support allegations that the RSE looked with disfavour on vocal Whigs and those of low social origins. For an account of Edinburgh science during the reaction to the French Revolution, see J. B. Morrell, ‘Professors Robison and Playfair and the *Theophobia Gallica*: natural philosophy, religion and politics in Edinburgh, 1789–1815’, *Notes and records of the Royal Society*, xxvi (1971), 43–63. This contradiction between the perceived élitism of the RSE and an idealized image of the scientific community has an instructive parallel in the situation affecting the Académie des Sciences in Paris under the *ancien régime*; see Roger Hahn, *The anatomy of a scientific institution: the Paris Academy of Sciences, 1666–1803* (Berkeley, Calif., 1971), especially chapter 5.

¹²² Dalzel, *op. cit.* (69), i. 44–5.

¹²³ H. J. C. Grierson (ed.), *The letters of Sir Walter Scott* (11 vols., London, 1932–6), vii. 35.

In 1797 Brougham and his friends established the Whig, youthful, and relatively informal 'Academy of Physics at Edinburgh', which conformed to their image of the scientific community and which was opposed to 'the abominable politics, trifling pursuits & vile aristocracy which swayed the R. Societies of London & Edin'.¹²⁴

These sorts of criticisms of the early RSE drew upon a widely diffused image of 'the scientific community' which had come into conflict with concrete local realities. Criticisms of the Society's 'monopolizing' tendencies and social exclusiveness were very largely grounded in fact; criticisms of the RSE's general scientific competence were almost entirely baseless formulations, rooted in the resentment of outsiders. In other British contexts, particularly in the rapidly expanding industrial and mercantile towns, the local scientific society came to be the cultural vehicle of 'new men', many of whom saw in science a 'new' form of culture, appropriate to their social situation and expressive of their view of a liberal society. Edinburgh's major scientific society answered to none of these perceptions; the RSE was the result of realignments among traditional cultural institutions, established to safeguard traditional interests. In view of the circumstances of its founding, it is hardly surprising that it came under attack from those whose conception of the organization of science was heavily influenced by a liberal scientific model of society. The RSE was not established to provide for the organizational requirements of professional men of science nor did it embody a liberal scientific orientation appropriate to progressively-minded marginal men. The particulars of the RSE's origins make it clear why this was the case and point to the value of a local approach to the study of the social relations of science.

APPENDIX

Text of John Walker's *Proposal for establishing at Edin',
a Society for the Advancement of Learning and Usefull Knowledge.*
(EUL MS. La. III. 352/1)

Dated: 2 March 1782.

1. It is proposed, that a number of the Members of the University, of the Faculty of Advocates, of the present Philosophical and Antiquarian Societies, and of other Noblemen and Gentlemen, should be united and incorporated by a Charter from the Crown, under the Name of the Royal Society of Edin', for the Advancement of Learning and Usefull Knowledge.
2. That in the said Charter, the Noblemen and Gentlemen to be nominated as original Members, should be empowered to make By Laws for the Regulation of the Society, and for the Election of future Members.

¹²⁴ Brougham to James Reddie, 17 December 1796, NLS MS. 3704, f. 1; Brougham to Horner, 29 December 1796, Horner Correspondence, London School of Economics, i. f. 25. I owe these references to Dr G. N. Cantor of Leeds University. For an account of the Academy's three-year career, see Cantor, 'The Academy of Physics at Edinburgh', *Science studies*, forthcoming.

3. That the Society should be arranged into two Classes. The one, for the Prosecution of Philosophy: the other, of Antiquities.
4. That the Class for Philosophy, should have for its objects, the Sciences of Mathematicks, Physicks, Chemistry, Medicine and Natural History: the Influence of these Sciences upon the various liberal and mechanical Arts: especially their Application to the Improvement of the Agriculture, Manufactures and Fisheries of Scotland.
5. That the other Class should have for its Objects, the three following Branches of literature: Antiquities, Philology, and Belles Lettres: and should have particularly in view, the Investigation of the Antiquities of our own Country.
6. That during Session Time, the Society should meet every Thursday.
7. That on one Thursday, the Society should meet on the Subject of Philosophy, and the next Thursday, on that of Antiquities, alternately. But that every Member of the Society may attend either one, or both of these meetings, as he chuses.
8. Each Member to pay one Guinea, annually.
9. Any Bodies relative to the Class of Philosophy, which may come into the possession of the Society, to be placed in the Colledge of Edin^r. And any Collections relative to the Class of Antiquities, to be deposited & preserved in the Advocates Library.