Elite Women and Polite Society

IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTLAND

Katharine Glover

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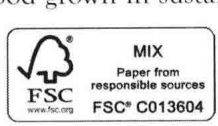

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ELITE WOMEN AND POLITE SOCIETY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTLAND

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To the memory of all the women whose scribbled notes and carefully crafted correspondence made this research possible.

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List of Abbreviations

AHR	American Historical Review
BJECS	British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies
BOEC	Book of the Old Edinburgh Club
ECL	Eighteenth-Century Life
ECS	Eighteenth-Century Studies
EUL	Edinburgh University Library
Fasti	Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae: The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation* (2nd edn)
GUL	Glasgow University Library
HJ	*The Historical Journal*
HLQ	*Huntington Library Quarterly*
HWJ	*History Workshop Journal*
JECS	*Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*
JSHS	*Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
NLS	National Library of Scotland
NRAS	National Register of Archive (Scotland)
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edn, 2004)
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary* (online edn)
OPR	Church of Scotland Old Parish Registers
P&P	*Past and Present*
SECC	*Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*
SHR	*Scottish History Society*
STS	*Scottish Text Society*
TNA	The National Archives
Trans DGNHS	*Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History Society*
Trans RHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*

Original spelling, punctuation and capitalisation have been retained in quotations throughout.

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Preface

In July 1746, Betty Fletcher, the fourteen-year-old daughter of a prominent Edinburgh judge, wrote a letter to her brother in which she described the supposedly quiet social life of Edinburgh during the summer social season:

> the town is very empty at present Colonel Leese regiment keeps it alive it helps assemblys & plays thers two plays every week & the last assembly is to be on thursday Lady Ancrim [sic] has a drawing room every Wednesday so the twon [sic] is tolerable gay tho few company in it ... the Meadow is vastly frequented in fine weather[1]

Despite describing the town as 'very empty', suggesting a lack of 'good' company, she acknowledged the entertainment provided by two plays a week and a dancing assembly, as well as a private gathering organised in an aristocratic townhouse. She noted that, in good weather, the gentry and nobility would escape the cramped and smoky confines of their Old Town apartments to 'take an airing' in the Meadows, the open ground lying just to the south of Edinburgh's urban boundaries. These social gatherings afforded men and women the opportunity to meet and gossip with friends and acquaintances, to show off their good taste in dress, manners and deportment, and to observe that of their counterparts. In assemblies, plays, outdoor promenades and a ready supply of men in military uniform, Betty Fletcher was outlining the essential ingredients necessary to maintain a lively social atmosphere for young women like herself and her sisters. This book, however, will demonstrate that the social activities which she was describing held a meaning far beyond the entertainment of teenage girls.

Pleasurable as they may have been, these activities were not merely frivolous pastimes. Rather, they created new opportunities for elite Scotswomen to engage with the world beyond their immediate social circles, which had far-reaching repercussions for both individuals and for Scottish society more broadly. Whilst their foremothers' lives were not, of course, bereft of sociability or enjoyment, and whilst girls like Betty Fletcher were still expected to grow up to take on important practical roles in estate and household management, the ideological prominence given to women's participation in social, often public activities such as those outlined above belonged to a culture that was self-consciously progressive and new to the eighteenth century. This book explores the impact of these new social developments on the lives of elite women in Scotland, ca.1720–ca.1770. It asks how women were able to use these develop-

[1] National Library of Scotland, MS16513 f.193, 15 July 1746.

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ments to extend their mental horizons, and to form a sense of belonging to a public. It considers the ways in which this affected the experience of elite femininity in that society. It takes as its source material the correspondence, accounts, bills, memoirs and other papers of gentry families like that of Betty Fletcher; of the sisters of the socially ambitious architect Robert Adam; and of aristocrats like the daughters of the second Duke of Atholl and of his brother, the Jacobite General Lord George Murray.

The chapters of this book progress in widening arcs through elite women's social experience, from the earliest education of young girls at their mothers' knees to, at the end of the final chapter, the opportunities for self-expression opened up by Continental travel. The book considers the impact on elite women's lives of new fashions in education and schooling; of the increasing availability of books and other printed texts; and of the fashionable social activities outlined above. It investigates the ways in which women were able to use these activities as a means of participation in other aspects of public life, in particular in the world of politics which, until recently, was considered to have been off-limits to women at this time. The first chapter begins by introducing the historical background to the society in which these women lived.

1

Elite Women and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Society

'Growing polit with the rest of the World'

When a weekly dancing assembly was set up in Edinburgh in the winter of 1723, it prompted Margaret, Countess of Panmure to comment in a letter to her husband that 'att last ... Old Reeky [i.e., Edinburgh] will grow polit with the rest of the World'.[1] Dancing assembly rooms had begun to develop in English resort towns from the late seventeenth century, and their popularity quickly spread, so that by the time the Countess was writing, assemblies were one of the defining social spaces of what had become known as polite society.[2] The concept of politeness lay at the heart of eighteenth-century elite society, particularly during the period to about 1770 with which this book is concerned. In this period to be polite meant far more than just the ability to demonstrate good etiquette or considerate behaviour; indeed, for Paul Langford, 'politeness' can be seen as a 'key-word' which opens up the mentality of the period.[3] Politeness was in its broadest sense an all-embracing concept: the social elite were known as 'the polite'; the society in which they moved was 'polite society'. But as the Countess of Panmure's comment suggests, it retained a strong aspirational quality, and the simple fact of aristocratic or genteel birth was not necessarily to be regarded by one's peers as genuinely polite. An amorphous concept, open to multiple interpretations by contemporaries as well as historians,[4] eighteenth-century politeness is probably best

1 NAS, GD45/14/220/145, 24 January 1723, Edinburgh. Dancing assemblies in Edinburgh would appear to date back to ca.1710, although little is known about these earlier ventures. James H. Jamieson, 'Social Assemblies of the Eighteenth Century', BOEC 19 (1933), pp.36–8.

2 Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989), pp.150–62.

3 Paul Langford, 'The Uses of Eighteenth-Century Politeness', *TransRHS*, 6th series, 12 (2002), p.311.

4 R. H. Sweet, 'Topographies of Politeness', *TransRHS*, 6th series, 12 (2002), p.357. Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660–1800* (Harlow, 2001), p.18, notes the problems involved in defining eighteenth-century notions of 'polite society'. For a survey of the multifarious uses of the term by both contemporaries and historians, see Lawrence E. Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *HJ*, 45:4 (2002).

understood as an ideal to which those of genteel and aristocratic birth were raised to conform, and as a continuous programme of social improvement to which it was generally expected that they would aspire throughout their lives.

Polite behaviour emphasised, in the words of Peter Borsay, 'triple constituents of civility, sociability and improvement',[5] or, in those of Philip Carter, 'propriety or decorum', good manners, and 'the display of generosity and accommodation to one's companions'.[6] Polite society emphasised 'ease and informality' as opposed to 'constraint and ceremony'.[7] The polite made fashionable the pursuit of not just good manners, but of reason, tolerance and improvement of the mind gained and spread through social interaction, particularly conversation. Most significantly for this study, this meant that men and women were encouraged to socialise together in an urban context, specifically in a series of social spaces like theatres, assembly rooms, concert halls, and around the tea-tables which were the centrepiece of every drawing room. These social spaces and the activities with which they were associated prioritised the leisure, sociability and status that were the core tenets of polite society.[8] They privileged a form of mixed-gender (or heterosocial) public leisure in which substantial female involvement was assumed. This first chapter provides an introduction to polite society in eighteenth-century Scotland. It commences with a brief examination of the notion of improvement, an imperative never far from the minds of the eighteenth-century Scottish elite and central to the developments considered here. It then considers eighteenth-century ideas about women and sociability in some more detail, and introduces the intellectual and social context of what has become known as the Scottish Enlightenment. This is followed by an overview of the historiography of the eighteenth-century Scotswoman, and of recent developments in the history of women in eighteenth-century Britain. The next section presents a brief background to the families whose papers have formed the source material for this book, and considers some relevant issues around the use of correspondence as a source. The chapter ends with an overview of the life-course of elite women in eighteenth-century Scotland.

Eighteenth-Century Scottish Society and the Idea of Improvement

The notion of the eighteenth century as *the* century of progressive, ameliorative and liberalising change in Scottish history was for a long time representative of mainstream attitudes towards eighteenth-century Scottish society, and has

5 Peter Borsay, 'Politeness and Elegance: The Cultural Re-Fashioning of Eighteenth-century York', in Mark Hallett and Jane Rendall (eds), *Eighteenth-Century York: Culture, Space and Society* (York, 2003), p.8.

6 Carter, *Emergence of Polite Society*, p.21.

7 Langford, 'Uses of Eighteenth-Century Politeness', p.315.

8 Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People, England 1727–1783* (Oxford 1989), p.102.

retained an influence on popular histories to the present day.[9] Yet most historians now stress the continuities between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scotland, emphasising that the cultural developments of the mid-eighteenth century were not at odds with the Scottish past.[10] So, for instance, whilst T. M. Devine has argued that 'To move from [the] Scotland of the 1690s to that of the middle decades of the eighteenth century is to enter a different world', he emphasised the ways in which that mid-eighteenth-century world emerged as the natural product of its predecessor.[11] In the past, historians may have been misled by the over-arching obsession of the early to mid-eighteenth-century Scottish elite with the idea of the new as progressive, influenced by a contemporary agenda that set store by political stability and economic progress as signifiers of civilisation. These notions presented significant hurdles for Scots concerned with their nation's progress in the first half of the eighteenth century. As late as the 1740s, according to Devine, the 'predicted economic miracle' that was to have resulted from the 1707 Union remained 'still an illusion'.[12] Scots had seen little improvement in living standards, agricultural yields remained low, and twice in the first four post-Union decades the country was thrown into internecine conflict by the failed Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745–6 and the violent repercussions of the latter in particular. In an age which put so much emphasis on the idea of progress, such (to contemporary eyes) 'backwardness' and factionalism, both characteristically impolite values, could appear seriously threatening to the status of Scotland as a modern, civilised nation. It is in this context, acknowledging the presence of the challenges against which the promoters of polite values and behaviour believed themselves to be operating, that the power of the polite ideal can best be comprehended.

Described by John Dwyer as 'a cultural imperative rather than a strictly factual observation',[13] the 'age of improvement' was about far more than

9 E.g., Henry Gray Graham, *The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1900; first published 1899), 2 vols; Marjorie Plant, *The Domestic Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1952). More recently, James Buchan, *Capital of the Mind: How Edinburgh Changed the World* (London, 2003) made strikingly similar claims, and the notion also underpins Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World* (London, 2002).

10 Influenced in particular by the work of David Allan, especially *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment: Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History* (Edinburgh, 1993). For immediately pre-Union culture, see Hugh Ouston, 'Cultural Life from the Restoration to the Union', in Andrew Hook (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature*, vol.2, 1660–1800 (Aberdeen, 1987); also Hugh Ouston, 'York in Edinburgh: James VII and the Patronage of Learning in Scotland, 1679–1688', in John Dwyer, Roger A. Mason and Alexander Murdoch (eds), *New Perspectives on the Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982).

11 T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700–2000* (London, 1999), pp.65, 67–70.

12 T. M. Devine, 'The Modern Economy: Scotland and the Act of Union', in T. M. Devine, C. H. Lee and G. C. Peden (eds), *The Transformation of Scotland: The Economy Since 1700* (Edinburgh, 2005), p.27.

13 John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987), p.2.

draining ditches, encouraging industries, or building roads. For the men who sat on the Board of Trustees for the Encouragement of Fisheries and Manufactures or the Annexed Estates Commission, promoting these more practical manifestations of improvement was only one aspect of a wider social project.[14] In 1752, Sir Gilbert Elliot, second baronet (later Lord) Minto, put forward some *Proposals for carrying on certain Public Works In the City of Edinburgh*, to deal with the problems caused by overcrowding in this densely populated, precariously high-rise conglomeration. He believed that 'a capital should naturally become the centre of trade and commerce, of learning and the arts, of politeness and refinement of every kind', but that Edinburgh lagged far behind London because 'so many local prejudices, and narrow notions, inconsistent with polished manners and growing wealth, are still so obstinately retained'.[15] In keeping with contemporary thinking, Minto linked economic progress with social refinement. Edinburgh needed to develop physically, commercially and culturally, he argued, for the good of all Scotland as a modern, commercial and civilised nation.[16] For much of the century, the practical aspects of such improving agendas were often yet to travel from the realms of aspiration to those of reality. By the time of his death in 1767, Lord Minto could have seen only the very beginnings of the New Town's construction, and the Edinburgh with which this book is concerned was still largely that of the medieval Old Town, with its high-rise 'lands' and narrow wynds and closes in which all ranks of society were crowded together.[17] Yet Minto's plans neatly exemplify in an aspirational mode the ways in which by the 1750s the Scottish attempt to achieve the ideals of civilisation and progress was believed to be vested in a concern for broad-spectrum social and cultural improvement that connected commerce with refinement and dismissed the impolite as the provincial. Such writings effectively requested the support of the elite through all their activities and behaviour, cultural as well as economic, and from women as well as men.

This returns us to the Countess of Panmure's letter to her husband on the subject of the Edinburgh assembly rooms in 1723. Despite portraying the assembly rooms to her husband as a sign of polite progress, she added, slightly sniffily, that she would probably not attend very frequently. Yet the Countess was no mere observer of the Edinburgh assembly rooms; rather, she was, with some female friends, the motivating force behind the enterprise. Her reluctance to admit this to her husband may have stemmed from a

14 For the Board of Trustees, see John Stuart Shaw, *The Management of Scottish Society: Power, Nobles, Lawyers, Edinburgh Agents and English Influences* (Edinburgh, 1983), ch.6; and for the Annexed Estates Commission, Alexander Murdoch, *The People Above: Politics and Administration in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1980), pp.73–84.

15 [Gilbert Elliot, Lord Minto] *Proposals for carrying on certain Public Works In the City of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1752), p.8.

16 Ibid., p.5.

17 For the development of the Edinburgh New Town, see A. J. Youngson, *The Making of Classical Edinburgh, 1750–1840* (Edinburgh, 1966).

sense of guilt that she was rebuilding her life in Scotland whilst he lay dying in France, exiled as a result of his involvement in the 1715 Jacobite rising. But it is also an important reminder that whilst the Countess herself may have seen the assembly as a source of social improvement, the introduction of polite social spaces and activities, and women's involvement in them, was not without controversy in early eighteenth-century Scotland. The Countess informed her husband that the assembly was railed against by the Presbyterian ministers,[18] and it was soon condemned in print in a lengthy pamphlet which summarised assemblies as 'dishonourable to GOD, scandalous to Religion, and of dangerous Consequence to Human Society'. As the author explained, the debate was between those who believed the assembly was 'only designed to cultivate polite Conversation, and genteel Behaviour among the better Sort of Folks, and to give young People an Opportunity of accomplishing themselves in both', and those who believed that it would 'vitiate and deprave the Minds and Inclinations of the younger Sort'. For some, the regulated opportunity for mixed-gender socialising that the assembly afforded was a morally and socially improving force, ensuring the Scottish elite developed the best polite manners. But for others, it was a corrosive influence which distracted them from the religious duties on which their minds should be fixed.

Quickly to the defence came Allan Ramsay, Scotland's foremost poet at that time, and a consistent campaigner for the polite cause. In June 1723 he published *The Fair Assembly, A Poem*, which he dedicated to the assembly's Lady Managers whom he believed to be engaged in a truly patriotic, progressive endeavour. 'Right Honourable Ladies', he asked, 'How much is our whole Nation indebted to Your Ladyships for Your reasonable and laudable Undertaking to introduce Politeness amongst us'? If polite society emphasised easy, natural manners, they had to be learnt somewhere, and Scots who had not been brought up to understand the specific manners and behaviours associated with such spaces would be at risk of coming across as awkward when called upon to frequent them in future – for instance, when visiting London. So, by providing the nation's youth with a platform on which to learn and practise the 'easy, disingaged and genteel Manner' which defined the polite, the Countess and her friends, Ramsay argued, were carrying out a patriotic act of benevolence to the governing classes of post-Union Scotland. No more would Scots suffer the accusation of a 'barbarous Rusticity' as a result of their ignorance of how to converse and behave.[19] Instead, through their confident demonstration of polite, civilised behaviour, they would show Scotland to be a modern, civilised country. And absolutely vital to the success of this project was the regulatory role played by the Countess of Panmure and her female friends.[20] Participa-

18 NAS, GD45/14/220/145, 24 January 1723, Edinburgh.

19 Allan Ramsay, *The Fair Assembly: A Poem* (Edinburgh, 1723), preface.

20 By 1727, one supporter of the assembly published a pamphlet praising them for achieving these aims. James Freebairn, *L'Eloge d'Ecosse et des Dames Ecossoises* (Edinburgh, 1727).

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