INTENDING SCOTLAND

Explorations in Scottish Culture since the Enlightenment

Cairns Craig

Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Intending Scotland

For Conan

Preface

The chapters of *Intending Scotland* reflect – and reflect on – changes in Scotland since the establishment of the Scottish parliament, whose reshaping of Scotland's future requires a fresh understanding of its past. It deals with three groups of neglected Scottish thinkers. The first are the scientists – William Thomson, Peter Guthrie Tait, Macquorn Rankine and James Clerk Maxwell – who revolutionised physics by their discoveries in thermodynamics. The second is a group of biblical and classical scholars – John Ferguson McLennan, William Robertson Smith and Sir J. G. Frazer – whose work shaped the new science of anthropology from the 1860s till the 1920s. And the third – Andrew Seth, Robert Morrison MacIver, John Macmurray and Norman Kemp Smith – not only transformed the understanding of the history of Scottish philosophy but helped define the emergent discipline of sociology. I had hoped to include a chapter on Scottish women intellectuals of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries but that project has grown so large it will need (and deserves) a book to itself.

Some of this book was researched while I was still at the University of Edinburgh, where I benefited from extended sabbatical leave, in part funded by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. I would like to thank both the AHRC and the University for their support, and to thank (again) my former colleagues in the English Literature Department for providing such a stimulating environment to work in. Since moving back to the University of Aberdeen, where I first taught in the 1970s, I have had the privilege of being Director of the AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, and I have learned a great deal from those who have been involved in the Centre's work: I would particularly like to thank Edna Longley, Fran Brearton, Peter MacKay, John Kirk, Graham Walker and John Thomson in Queen's University, Belfast; David Dickson, Jane Ohlmeyer, Ian Campbell Ross, Terence Brown and Micheal O'Siochru in Trinity College, Dublin; and John Morrill of Cambridge University, as well as John MacKenzie, formerly

Contents

Introduction

The phenomenon of the Scottish Enlightenment has become the focus of such a vast scholarly industry, as well as being extolled as a political and cultural icon in Scotland and in North America, that it is easy to lose sight of just how recently it was identified as a specific historical occurrence. As Charles Withers and Paul Wood pointedly remind us in *Science and Medicine in the Scottish Enlightenment*, the first book-length study on the Scottish Enlightenment was only published in 1976[1] and the term only came into general use in the previous decade. Indeed, we can probably date the inauguration of the Scottish Enlightenment as a historical happening – and a historical issue – to Hugh Trevor-Roper's address to the Second International Congress on the Enlightenment at St Andrews in 1966.[2] What this date implies, however, is that the period of the emergence of the Scottish Enlightenment as a matter of intellectual concern is identical with the period of the emergence of modern Scottish nationalism, since the Scottish National Party went from having no MPs in 1964 to having eleven in 1974. Such a conjunction between the rise of the Scottish Enlightenment and the rise of Scottish nationalism is deeply ironic, since the Enlightenment has been regarded by nationalists, at least until recently, as a distinctly Unionist phenomenon, whose major proponents, such as Trevor-Roper, were committed to resisting Scottish self-government. Indeed, Trevor-Roper's original account of the Enlightenment emphasised that it was only made possible by breaking down 'the barricades of a defensive nationalism',[3] an achievement which he was in turn to defend by putting up barricades to the establishment of a devolved Scottish parliament

---

[1] Charles W. J. Withers and Paul Wood, *Science and Medicine in the Scottish Enlightenment* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002). The book was Anand C. Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment: A Social History* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).

[2] Published in Theodore Besterman (ed.), *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. LVIII (1967), 1635–58.

[3] Ibid., 1643.

in the 1970s.[4] What has come to be seen as one of Scotland's most significant contributions to world culture has, paradoxically, been treated with deep suspicion by nationalists, precisely because it has been so enthusiastically supported by anti-nationalists as proof that nationalism in Scotland would be incapable of producing a culture of world significance. The emphasis of Enlightenment historiography has been, according to nationalists, on the fact that the Scottish Enlightenment was produced not from native resources but from external – and, especially, English – influences. Put crudely, the Union was the fundamental cause of the Scottish Enlightenment and therefore any challenge to the Union is a betrayal of Scotland's greatest intellectual achievements. What is true of its modern supporters was also assumed to have been true of its original *dramatis personae*: they were committed not to the development of Scotland's national culture but to its suppression, and to the promotion of the virtues of Anglicisation as the effective route to intellectual and cultural distinction. As Colin Kidd has put it, 'nationalists found the theoretical detachment of Enlightenment social science to be a matter for reproach, and condemned the Scottish Enlightenment for its rootless, cosmopolitan betrayal of Scottish cultural distinctiveness'.[5]

Nonetheless, the increasing prominence of the Scottish Enlightenment and the rise of Scottish nationalism have in fact gone hand-in-hand: by 2002, when American historian Arthur Herman was to claim that the Scottish Enlightenment represented nothing less than the 'Invention of the Modern World',[6] construction had begun on the new Scottish parliament building next to Holyrood Palace, at the foot of Edinburgh's Royal Mile. The rise and rise of the international prominence of the Scottish Enlightenment did not provide the bulwark against nationalism that Trevor-Roper had hoped for. While nationalist historians, such as William Ferguson, would continue to insist that the Enlightenment thinkers 'were regressive', and 'impeded the triumph of record scholarship on which historical science depended',[7] the Enlightenment was itself becoming an element in the national distinction

---

[4] H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'Scotching the Myths of Devolution', *Times*, 28 April 1976, 14.

[5] Colin Kidd, 'Lord Dacre and the Politics of the Scottish Enlightenment', *Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. LXXXIV, 2, No. 218 (October 2005), 202–20, at 204.

[6] Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002).

[7] William Ferguson, *The Identity of the Scottish Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 206–7.

on which nationalist claims were founded. So while Iain Gray, on his election to the leadership of the Labour group in Holyrood in 2008, could claim anti-nationalist credentials on the basis that he had studied 'natural science in the academic home of the enlightenment',[8] Alex Salmond had no compunction in asking his supporters to reflect on and to take inspiration from 'Scotland's proud record of invention and our huge contribution, through the Enlightenment, in the development of the ideas that form the foundation of our modern world'.[9]

The notion of the Scottish Enlightenment has not only fundamentally changed the understanding of Scottish history since the 1960s, but has played a crucial role in the redefinition of modern Scotland's conception of its contemporary identity – and, therefore, of its possible future. In exploring Scottish culture since the Enlightenment, I am therefore invoking a double perspective: one focused on the consequences of that upsurge of Scottish innovation which we have come to call the Enlightenment – and whose historical lineaments have been attributed by Paul Wood to Dugald Stewart's account of his eighteenth-century predecessors[10] – and the other, the impact of the concept in Scottish cultural studies (and Scottish cultural politics) in the period since the 1960s. The major issue with which these two perspectives confront us is whether there is any continuity between the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and contemporary Scotland. For Trevor-Roper, the promotion of the Scottish Enlightenment was also the negation of all that had come to be accepted as Scottish culture in the intervening period, when not only Scotland but the rest of the world was seduced by the 'fantasies' of Walter Scott. The romantic Scotland promoted by Scott was, to Trevor-Roper, nothing less than a self-deluding evasion of the real nature of modern, progressive, industrial Scotland. For Scotland to fulfil its real identity, it had to resist the glamour of Scott's construction of its 'national' past in favour of the values of Enlightenment 'progress', this being the very discovery which was the greatest achievement of Scotland's eighteenth-century thinkers: 'Before sinking into the past as the raw material

---

[8] http://www.sundaymail.co.uk/news/scottish-news/2008/09/14 (accessed December 2008).

[9] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/20_04_08_salmond.pdf (accessed December 2008).

[10] Paul Wood, 'Dugald Stewart and the Invention of "the Scottish Enlightenment"', in Paul Wood (ed.), *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation* (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2000), 'Introduction'.

of the new romanticism, they had helped to stimulate that analysis of human progress which is the peculiar contribution of the Scottish Enlightenment.'[11] 'Progress' was both the key discovery of and the principal value of the Enlightenment, and it was identical with the beneficial effects of the Union and of Anglicisation. Contemporary Scotland's progress would likewise depend on retaining its commitment to those Enlightenment values, proof as they were of the illusory attractions of Scottish nationalism.

When the new Scottish parliament was convened on 12 May 1999, how-ever, a very different kind of continuity was asserted when Winnie Ewing – the oldest member and the one whose victory for the Scottish National Party in the safe Labour seat of Hamilton in 1967 (just a few months after Trevor-Roper's address in St Andrews) had indicated the unexpected surge in support for nationalism – declared that 'The Scottish Parliament, adjourned on the twenty-fifth day of March 1707, is hereby reconvened'. It was, in strictly legal terms, untrue, for the modern Scottish parliament is devolved from the Westminster parliament rather than being the old Scottish parlia-ment reconstituted, but what that assertion did was to present the years of a single British parliament as the interruption of a narrative which had now been resumed. For Trevor-Roper, on the other hand, this could represent only the recovery of a world in which 'Scotland was a by-word for irredeemable poverty, social backwardness, political faction' and in which the Scots would return 'to reiterate their atavistic war-cries: to remember Bannockburn, or to debate, for the thousandth time, the admittedly very debatable virtues of Mary Queen of Scots'.[12]

Which narrative did modern Scotland belong to? The relevance of the question, provoked initially by the emergence of the SNP in the 1960s, was to be sharpened by the failure of the Labour government's devolutionary proposals in 1979, which resulted in Mrs Thatcher's domination of British politics for the following thirteen years. For many, the Thatcherite revolu-tion was seen as the imposition of alien values on Scottish society – even if Malcolm Rifkind, her Scottish Secretary of State, declared these to be the values of the Scottish Enlightenment.[13] That Scots consistently voted against the Conservatives but became the testing ground for many of their most radical initiatives (such as the 'Poll Tax') only increased the sense of living in

---

[11] Trevor-Roper, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', 1658.

[12] Ibid., 1636–7.

[13] Christopher Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics 1707–1994* (London: Routledge, 1994; 2nd edn), 202–3.

a narrative of someone else's invention. It is a condition which I described in the 1980s as being 'out of history' – that is, being cut off from any narrative which could connect the national present in a meaningful way to the national past. I attributed the beginnings of this contradiction to David Hume and the other historians of the Enlightenment in whose works the narrative of 'progress' represented the fundamental virtue of English history, an English history to which events in Scotland had been irrelevant. Insofar as Scotland had joined the history of 'progress', it had to accept that its historical origin was not in its native development but in the development of the structures of English society.[14] Being 'out of history', both in the Enlightenment construction of 'British' history and in the practical politics of the Thatcherite 1980s, proved, however, to be the prologue to an outpouring of historical writing in Scotland, involving a radical remaking of Scotland's past, and culminating in 2007 in an orgy of historiographic production to mark – and to contest – the three hundredth anniversary of the Union.[15]

The irony of this great upsurge in Scottish historical writing since the 1960s – sufficient to inspire 'one American observer', Michael Lynch tells us in the introduction to his 'new history' of Scotland, 'to write of a second Enlightenment'[16] – is that it has responded to the foundering of the narrative of Scottish history by effectively dispensing with the need for narrative. As Michael Fry has noted, the major event of nineteenth-century Scotland, the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843, is almost unknown to the modern population of the country and almost inexplicable in contemporary historiography.[17] In place of narrative explanation, the histories which accompanied the intensifying debate over a Scottish parliament turned increasingly

---

[14] See, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), which collected essays from the 1980s.

[15] See, for instance, T. M. Devine (ed.), *Scotland and the Union: 1707–2007* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Michael Fry, *The Union: England, Scotland and the Treaty of 1707* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007); Allan I. Macinnes, *Union and Empire: The Making of the United Kingdom in 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); John Robertson (ed.), *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jeffrey A. Stephen, *Scottish Presbyterians and the Act of Union* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Christopher A. Whatley, *The Scots and the Union* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

[16] Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London: Pimlico, 1991), xv.

[17] Michael Fry, 'The Disruption and the Union', in Stewart J. Brown and Michael Fry (eds), *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 31.

instead to economic analysis. If Scotland had any kind of historical narrative it had to be dug out of its economic base rather than its political superstructure, which, as Richard Finlay commented in the conclusion to his *Modern Scotland 1914–2000*, 'has been largely directionless'.[18] Statistics rather than the state formed the basis of the major histories produced by economic and social historians from T.C.Smout in the 1960s to T.M.Devine in the 1990s – the social rather than the personal, the institutional rather than the individual.

Insofar as these histories did, however, invoke an underlying narrative structure, it was one that continued to be firmly tied to the traditional structures of English historiography. T.M.Devine's best-selling account of *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000* might have asserted the continuity of the Scottish 'nation' in terms appropriate to the opening of the new parliament, but the argument of the book effectively transferred to Scotland the assumed pre-eminence in industrial development that had always been part of the narrative of English history. While the conception of an 'Industrial Revolution' had faded in English historiography, Devine tells us, 'north of the Border there truly was an Industrial and Agricultural Revolution. In fact, recent research on comparative urban development in Europe suggests that the explosive Scottish rate of town and city growth was the fastest of any region in Britain or the Continent between 1750 and 1850.'[19] Thus England's leading role as the first truly urban society is displaced by Scotland's much shorter and therefore more intense experience: '… the Scottish rate of urban growth after *c.* 1760 was significantly faster than England's and the process of economic change more intense and convulsive than that of her southern neighbour. Here indeed was a society *par excellence* in which traditional religious structures must have been powerfully challenged by the enormous force of industrialization.'[20]

What once had been the uniquely distinctive narrative of English history has, in this account, become the distinguishing feature of Scottish history. Thus Engels's analysis of English industrial society is presented as being 'even more valid for Scotland', as Scotland becomes, in Devine's account, the paradigm case of modernisation in nineteenth-century Europe.[21] It is an

---

[18] Richard Finlay, *Modern Scotland 1914–2000* (London: Profile, 2004), 397.
[19] T.M.Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1999] 2000), 107–8.
[20] Ibid., 364.
[21] Ibid., 487.

account in which Scotland takes over the lineaments of the whig view of history that had itself been transposed, in the 1950s and 60s, into the New Left conception of the unbroken continuity of the 'long revolution' wrought by the English working-class, and which Devine finds in the 'Scottish radical tradition': 'The values of justice, fairness, morality, self-help and the conviction that all men should work together for the common good, which Chartism inherited and refined, profoundly influenced the Labour movement of the later nineteenth century and beyond. Despite successive failures, there was a remarkable thread of continuity in the radical tradition.'[22] Scotland is reunited with its forward historical trajectory by becoming the real medium of the progressive structure once accorded to England's working-class radicalism and recovers its relationship with a general conception of progressive history by domesticating the English narrative that had previously been used to demonstrate Scotland's historical *lack* of significance. The difficulty this poses to Scottish historians seems to be acknowledged by Devine in his later book, *Scotland's Empire 1600–1815*, when he notes how, on key issues such as relationship of imperial wealth to industrial development, a real understanding of the dynamics of the Scottish situation has been hampered by the fact that 'Scottish historiography has been influenced by English thinking on empire and industrialization'.[23] Scottish history, in other words, like the Scottish parliament whose areas of responsibility were far less than those of German *länder* or Canadian states, continued to be a *domestic* history which operated within fundamentally anglocentric structures.

The economic emphasis in contemporary presentations of Scotland's national history – which reflects, indeed, the economistic orientation of even nationalist politics in contemporary Scotland – ignores the extent to which the real driving force of Scottish difference and of Scottish *distinction* was not in the brute fact of its economic development, nor in the profound social problems which that development left to the modern nation, but in the power of its cultural response to those economic developments. It is not the dramatic upsurge of the Scottish economy in the eighteenth century that makes Scotland internationally important but that Scotland, through those institutions which the Union had left intact – the law, the universities, the church – as well as through its very productive publishing industry, retained a context in which it was possible to interpret its economic transformation in

---

[22] Ibid., 280.

[23] T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 327.

radically new ways.[24] Equally, it was the reproduction of elements of Scotland's distinctively different cultural infrastructure that made its contribution to the British Empire more than just a repetition of English cultural forms.

It is the sustained nature of that cultural achievement, however, that has been put in question by accounts of the Scottish Enlightenment which are premised on the fact that Enlightenment in Scotland did not only come to end but had no continuing influence on the development of later Scottish culture. These narratives present Scotland as a country in precipitous decline from its once internationally acknowledged eminence, and make the Enlightenment an isolated event that simply underlines the mediocrity of what follows on from it. And yet the period of the rise in interest in the Enlightenment is also the period of one of the greatest outpourings of Scottish creativity – in literature, in the visual arts, and in popular culture – since the beginning of the nineteenth century. What those creative achievements suggested – against the wishes of promoters of Enlightenment like Trevor-Roper – was that Scotland had, long before the new parliament became the 'settled will of the Scottish people', effectively declared cultural independence.

That the arrival of the parliament has not–or not yet, at any rate–made the issue of Scotland's relationship to its past, and to the nature of history-as-progress, irrelevant is suggested by the terms of a review of Neal Ascherson's *Stone Voices*, written by the Scottish novelist and columnist Andrew O'Hagan in October 2002. *Stone Voices* is a meditation on the matter of Scotland, focused around Ascherson's experiences as a journalist for the *Scotsman* newspaper in the period leading to the devolution referendum of 1979, and then again in the run-up to the referendum of 1997, when he was part of a touring group of writers and artists campaigning for a 'yes' vote. O'Hagan praised Ascherson's work only when the latter was analysing the 'Scottish trauma' of 'self-doubt' that represented a 'deep geological fault running underneath national self-confidence', but attacked him for not seeing that,

> Free-falling anxiety about Scottishness has a tendency among Scots, not only to turn into hatred of others, but into hating bad news about the country itself, and seeing critics as traitors. There are few European nations in which the intellectuals are so willing to serve as soft-pedalling merchants of 'national character,' handmaidens to the tourist

---

[24] As Colin Kidd, points out, it was precisely the uniqueness of Scotland's response to the experience of 'progress' that Trevor-Roper had emphasised in 1966; 'Lord Dacre and the Politics of Scottish Enlightenment', 207–10.

industry: broadcasters, academics, lawyers, some of the poets too, sell pride and tears, spiritual laxity and pawky good humour in place of inquiry.[25]

There is a profound irony in this attack since there are in fact few European nations where the intellectuals, from Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir in the 1920s and 30s, to Tom Nairn and others of the New Left such as Colin McArthur in the 1970s and 80s, have spilled so much ink on excoriating attacks on the history of their national culture. For O'Hagan, 'Scotland should have outgrown its own pantomime by now', but has not because 'nationalism in Scotland is a place where good men and women busy themselves shaking the dead hand of the past'. It is O'Hagan, however, rather than Scotland, who is shaking the dead hand of the past, a past in which decades of Scottish intellectuals have maintained a relentless attack upon the versions of Scottish culture produced by the success of Burns's poetry or Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels.

What O'Hagan finds most unacceptable is Ascherson's presentation of Scotland through its landscape of stone: the poetry of stone, he suggests, 'appeals to those who are more taken with essence than experience, those who, for good reasons not bad, wish for an overarching grandeur, a galvanising truth, something in the Scottish character that can live up to the landscape. It is part of what Ibsen called "the saving lie".'[26] The reference to Ibsen's play 'The Wild Duck' is presumably intended to confront Scottish falsity with the sternness of a European realism, but Ibsen's work has been so often performed in Scotland – and so often in Scots – over the last fifty years that he is almost an honorary Scottish writer. Scottish audiences would certainly have a more subtle conception of the ironies of Ibsen's 'saving lie' than O'Hagan's opposition implies. 'Ascherson's stones', he concludes, 'are interesting, they are not as interesting as people.'[27] But for Ascherson the special quality of the Scottish landscape is that it is an appropriate context for trying to find 'a new way to understand humanity's integral place in creation',[28] one that will replace a Faustian conception of humanity's dominating role in relation

---

[25] Andrew O'Hagan, 'A Beast of a Nation', *London Review of Books*, 31 October 2002, 12.

[26] Ibid., 11.

[27] Ibid., 12.

[28] Neal Ascherson, *Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland* (London: Granta, [2002] 2003), 29.