

The Scottish Enlightenment in the 18th Century

by Anthony Avice Du Buisson



Figure 1. Cameo of Thomas Reid (Tassie, n.d.).

Since the Scottish reformation in the mid-16th century, which separated Scotland from the dominion of the papacy, the predominantly Calvinist Kirk had established deep rooted influence throughout the nation – forming a key part of Scotland's identity. Dissent towards the Kirk in form of critique was not tolerated as those accused of heresy, witchcraft and other forms of 'blasphemy' were executed (Mitchison, 2002, p.222). This would continue right up until the late 17th century with the execution of young student Thomas Aikenhead in 1697 – the last individual executed for blasphemy in Scotland (BBC Radio 4, 2002).

Scotland underwent a fundamental paradigm shift in the 18th century, as the nation transitioned away from a religiously conservative society dominated by the Kirk (the Scottish church) to a centre of science, commerce and cosmopolitanism in Britain. Typified by a revolution in approach to human nature and society, Scottish thinkers, such as Thomas Reid, David Hume and William Robertson, engaged in discourse over new ideas and ways of thinking – teetering on the edge of the unknown and reforming old methodology for the betterment of society.



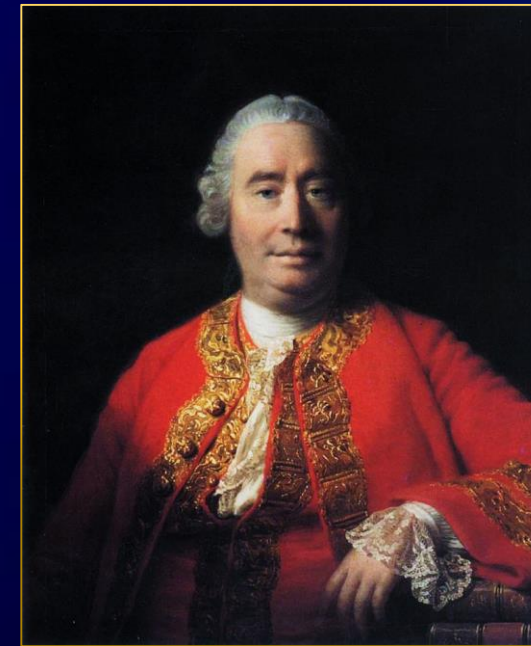
Figure 4. Bust of Adam Smith (Parc, 1845).

Figure 2. Portrait of Francis Hutcheson (Gallery of Masters, n.d.).



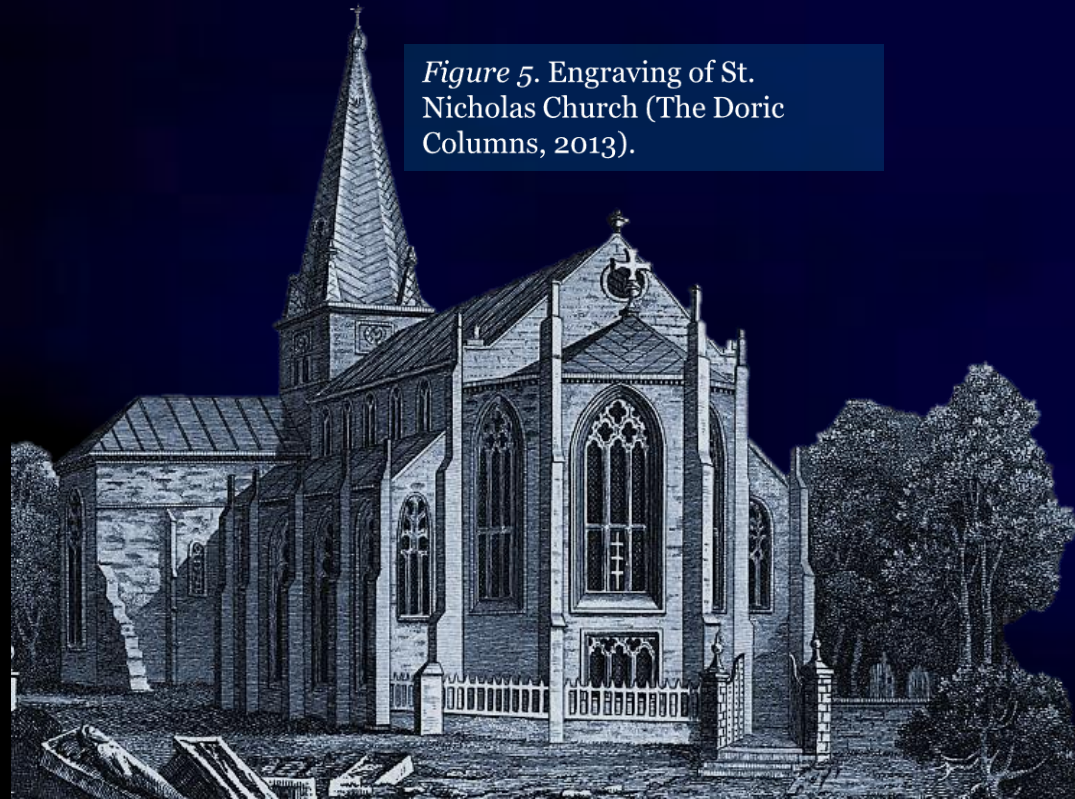
The fusion of the English and Scottish Parliaments in 1707 under the 'Acts of Union' gave rise to a new class within Scotland. This new class, centred in the universities and academic institutions of Edinburgh and later Glasgow was made up of lawyers, philosophers, ministers and other intellectuals (Lynch, 2001, pp. 133-137). Clubs and societies emerged throughout the next couple decades, spurred on by discussions over books from philosophers, such as Francis Hutcheson and leading to the development of an intellectual network (BBC Radio 4, 2002).

Figure 3. Portrait of David Hume (Ramsay, 1766).



David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1738) created uproar within the elite of Scottish urban society as the philosophy of empiricism put forward by Hume brought reaction by Thomas Reid – helping to birth an entire movement known as the Scottish School of Common Sense. Hume's philosophy of scepticism towards the establishment of state institutions and societies through the examination of history gave birth to the human sciences (Mitchison, 2002, p. 236). Kings were not established by divine right, but rather through conquest, custom and public grant. In this respect, Hume questioned the legitimacy of divinity, divine right of kings to rule and religious institutions, such as the Kirk (Berry, 2011, pp. 13-16).

Figure 5. Engraving of St. Nicholas Church (The Doric Columns, 2013).



Towards the mid-18th century, the Kirk faced internal strife between moderates and Evangelicals. In response to Hume's scepticism, moderate ministers such as William Robertson began to reassess church doctrine – to reformulate doctrines to be more pluralistic and tolerant, helping to liberalise the Kirk within (BBC Radio 4, 2002). This led to a few secessions (1738 and 1758) within the Kirk and a paradigm shift within Scotland itself. Robertson, Reid and Adam Smith each published their own works on society, history, philosophy and the economy. Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* established the field of economics, helping to bring commerce to Scotland towards the 18th century (Scottish Philosophy in the 18th Century, 2017).



Figure 6. Portrait of Rev. William Robertson (Reynolds, 1772).

As the 18th century ended, Scotland was now the main centre for intellectual inquiry and natural philosophy in Britain, highlighting the paradigm shift from religious conservatism to pluralism, science and enlightenment within less than a century. Inspiring continental philosophers in Europe and writers in the Americas, the impact of the Scottish Enlightenment in the 18th century was important for Scotland and the world (BBC Radio 4, 2002).

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