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# Benjamin Franklin and the Edinburgh Enlightenment<sup>1</sup>

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ON THIS TRICENTENARY of the birth of Benjamin Franklin, his place on the world stage, including his long stays in England and France, will surely be emphasised. My task is to draw attention to the clear links he established with Scotland, evidenced by the two journeys he made to that country in 1759 and then in 1771.

## EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EDINBURGH

Why would Franklin, familiar with the great centres of London and Paris, want to undertake the lengthy and tiresome journey by stagecoach to a small, cold city on the northern fringes of civilization? Small, cold, and northern it undoubtedly was, but the key word is civilization. Edinburgh, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, was the centre of the Scottish Enlightenment, a remarkable era in the intellectual history of Europe, and a place where Franklin felt very much at home and where he met many “men of genius.” It was said with pride and only modest exaggeration that “you could stand at the Mercat Cross and, in half an hour, shake fifty men of genius by the hand” (fig. 1).

Observers from outside Scotland were fulsome in their tributes. Edward Topham from Oxford, who spent many years in Scotland, said, “There is no part of the world where so general an education can be obtained as in Edinburgh. . . . There are few places where a polite education can be better acquired than in this city; and where the knowledge requisite to form a Gentleman, and a man of the world, can be sooner obtained.”

Benjamin Franklin himself, speaking from personal experience, asserted that “the University of Edinburgh possessed a set of truly great

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<sup>1</sup>Read 28 April 2006, during the Annual General Meeting celebrating the Franklin Tercentenary.



FIGURE 1. David Allan, *Edinburgh, The High Street*. Reproduced by permission of the National Galleries of Scotland.

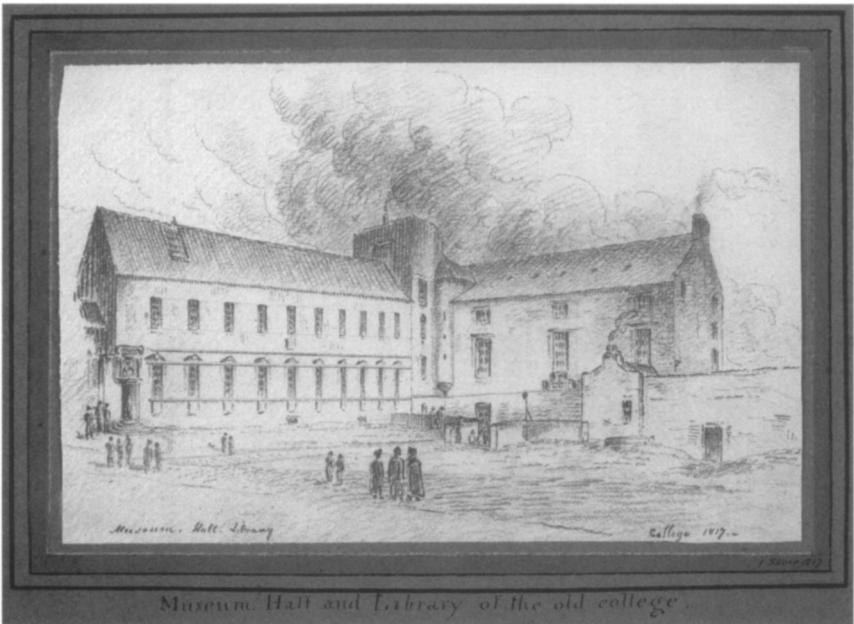


FIGURE 2. James Skene, *Museum Hall and Library of the Old College*, 1817. Courtesy of The Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh City Libraries.

men, Professors of Several Branches of Knowledge, as have ever appeared in any age or country” (fig. 2).

Similar praise came from Thomas Jefferson: “So far as science is concerned, no place in the world can pretend to competition with Edinburgh,” while Frederick Wedderburn, a German visitor in 1791, proclaimed, “Scotland has produced, within these modern times, learned men and writers of great reputation, who cannot but excite the jealousy of their southern neighbours.”

So who were these men of genius who were so widely recognised? More than two centuries later, the names of David Hume and his young friend Adam Smith still stand out as pivotal figures in philosophy and economics (figs. 3–4). But they were surrounded by other able men who were important figures of their time. Henry Home (Lord Kames) was a judge with a strong philosophical bent who published extensively and might be described as an enlightened aristocrat (fig. 5). William Robertson was a serious historian who, as principal, for more than thirty years was mainly responsible for making Edinburgh one of the leading universities of Europe (fig. 6).

Science, embracing medicine, included many eminent figures such as Joseph Black, the chemist who discovered carbon dioxide, and James Hutton, the pioneering geologist whose theories established the antiquity of the earth (figs. 7–8).



FIGURE 3. Allan Ramsay, *David Hume* (1711–1776).  
Reproduced by permission of the National Galleries of Scotland.



FIGURE 4. John Kay, *Adam Smith* (1723–1790), sketch. Reproduced by permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.



FIGURE 5. John Kay, *Henry Home, Lord Kames* (1696–1782), sketch.



FIGURE 6. Sir Henry Raeburn, *William Robertson* (1721–1793). Reproduced by permission of the Division of Special Collections, Edinburgh University Library.

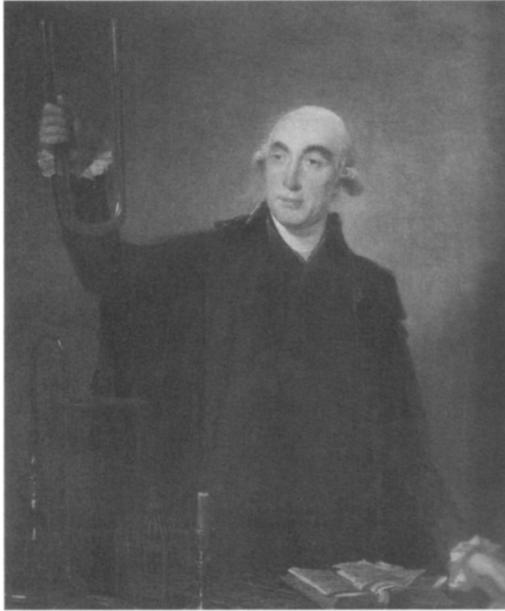


FIGURE 7. David Martin, *Joseph Black* (1728–1799). Reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Medical Society.

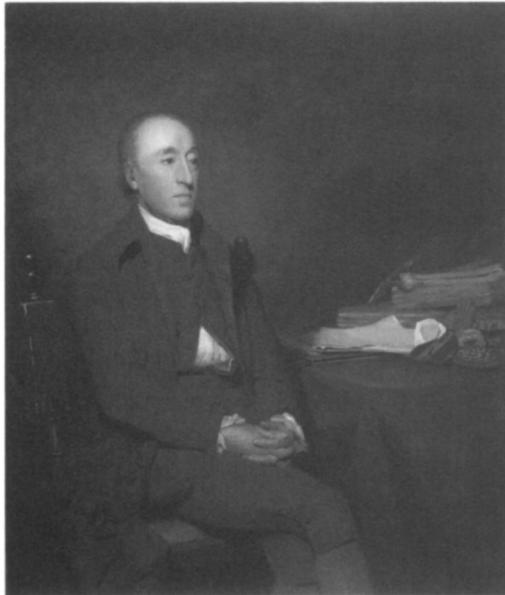


FIGURE 8. Sir Henry Raeburn, *James Hutton* (1726–1797). Reproduced by permission of the National Galleries of Scotland.



FIGURE 9. Allan Ramsay (attr.), *Alexander Dick* (1703–1785). Reproduced by permission of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh.

Alexander Dick and John Pringle were famous physicians, both good friends of Franklin, and Pringle went on to become president of the Royal Society (of London). He served as physician to the army and was the person who first persuaded generals that hospitals should not be military targets (figs. 9–10).

During the second half of the century the arts began to flourish in Edinburgh as never before, with Robert Adam, the architect who left his mark both on the city and further south, and portrait painters such as Allan Ramsay and Henry Raeburn (figs. 11–12). Nor should we forget the lawyer and famed biographer, James Boswell, whose writings have so

enlightened and entertained subsequent generations (fig. 13).

However incomplete, any list should contain names such as James Watt, of steam engine fame, and John Witherspoon, who played a prominent part across the Atlantic. I have chosen to mention, in the main, those whom Franklin got to know well and with whom he corresponded.

In trying to understand the Edinburgh that attracted and hosted Franklin we should remember two things. In the first place, Edinburgh was a very small,<sup>2</sup> compact city and everyone in cultivated circles knew everyone else. Intellectual life had a strong social dimension, with wining and dining playing a central and stimulating role. In this the minor aristocrats such as Lord Kames and Sir Alexander Dick would act as generous hosts. Frank-



FIGURE 10. Unknown artist, *Sir John Pringle* (1707–1782), sketch. Reproduced by permission of the Division of Special Collections, Edinburgh University Library.

<sup>2</sup> By comparison with the large capitals of London and Paris, but similar in population to the Philadelphia of the time.

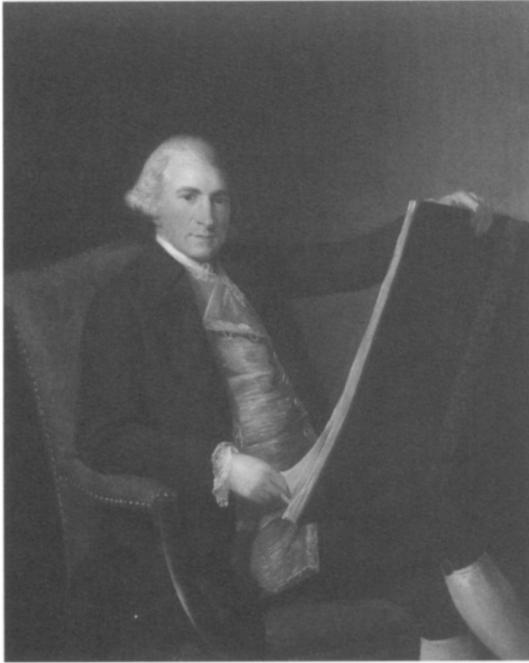


FIGURE 11. George Willison (attr.), *Robert Adam* (1728–1792).  
Reproduced by permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

lin was a frequent beneficiary of that hospitality. His stays in Edinburgh were both socially enjoyable and intellectually stimulating, just the combination that appealed to Franklin.

The second point to note is that the modern divisions between specialised disciplines that we now take for granted would not have made much sense to Franklin's contemporaries. We may identify Hume as a philosopher, Smith as an economist, and Robertson as a historian, but in eighteenth-century Edinburgh such barriers had little meaning. Hume wrote also on history, Smith on philosophy, and even scientists (a nineteenth-century term) regarded themselves as natural philosophers. Nor were the practicing professionals in law and medicine separated from the academic



FIGURE 12. Allan Ramsay, *Self-Portrait*. Reproduced by permission of the National Galleries of Scotland.



FIGURE 13. George Willison, *James Boswell* (1740–1795).  
Reproduced by permission of the National Galleries of Scotland.

scholars as they now tend to be. On the contrary judges and physicians were fully part of the intellectual circle.

In other words, the “men of genius” all knew each other, dined frequently together, and covered all aspects of life in the university and the city. No wonder that Franklin, the man of all parts, felt at home.

The fame of Edinburgh, and in particular of the university, spread not only west across the Atlantic but east to Tsarist Russia. At the Tercentenary meeting I learnt the remarkable story of the Princess Dashkova, who had been appointed by her friend Catherine the Great as director of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg.<sup>3</sup> Dashkova travelled widely in Europe, corresponded with Franklin, and became the first woman member of the American Philosophical Society. From all the great educational centres of Europe she chose Edinburgh for the education of her son. She herself lived in Edinburgh while he studied there and chose, in conjunction with Principal Robertson, a suitable

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<sup>3</sup>Sue Ann Prince, ed., *The Princess and the Patriot: Ekaterina Dashkova, Benjamin Franklin, and the Age of Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2006).

course of study. It is pleasant to record that the son successfully completed his course, earning his degree, but the close maternal supervision did not have such a happy outcome.

It is an intriguing question to ask why Edinburgh should have reached such great intellectual heights during that period. Historians have speculated in many directions,<sup>4</sup> but a key factor undoubtedly was the spread of education in Scotland and in particular the fact that, by 1600, it boasted four universities (or colleges),<sup>5</sup> whereas England, with a much larger population, had only two (until the nineteenth century). The Reformation, with its emphasis on reading the Bible, certainly encouraged education, even if, in its extreme Calvinist form, it stifled free thought. Edinburgh University, moreover, had the distinction of having been set up by the city of Edinburgh, not by the church. This did not totally exempt it from religious influence, but it meant that there were fewer religious barriers to entry than elsewhere. It has also been suggested that politics played an indirect role. The collapse of the last Jacobite uprising in 1745 was followed by a period of political calm when radical thoughts were not seen as a threat to the state. This can be compared favourably with the repressive regime of William Pitt, after the French Revolution, which led the famous chemist and radical preacher Joseph Priestley to flee to America.

It may also be relevant that universities elsewhere were going through bad times. Oxford and Cambridge were at a low point, in the grip of the established church, while continental Europe was suffering from continuous wars, and soon from the upheaval of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era. For many years Edinburgh was a very attractive alternative, and young scholars would gravitate there.

#### FRANKLIN IN EDINBURGH

On each of his two trips to Scotland, Franklin spent several weeks there, mainly in Edinburgh, though he did go to St. Andrews to acquire the honorary doctorate of which he was so proud. His closest friend was undoubtedly David Hume, a kindred spirit with a similarly sceptical outlook. On his second visit, Hume had just moved into a house in

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<sup>4</sup>David Daiches, Jean Jones, and Peter Jones, *A Hotbed of Genius, the Scottish Enlightenment 1730–1790* (Edinburgh, 1986); W. Creech, *Letters respecting the mode of living, trade, manners, and literature, &c. of Edinburgh, in 1763* (Edinburgh, 1793); R.A. Houston, *Social Change in the Age of Enlightenment, Edinburgh 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1884).

<sup>5</sup>Actually five, since Aberdeen had two, subsequently merged with the famous outcome that a young physics professor called James Clerk Maxwell was sacked.

the New Town. Franklin stayed there as his guest. He recorded this event most appreciatively in a letter to a friend.

Edinburgh, Oct 27, 1771

Dear Friend

Thro' Storms and Floods I arrived here on Saturday night, late, and was lodg'd miserably at an Inn; But that excellent Christian David Hume, agreeable to the Precepts of the Gospel, has received the Stranger and I now live with him at his House in the new Town most happily. I purpose staying about a Fortnight, and shall be glad to hear from you. I congratulate you on certain Political Events that I know give you Pleasure. Let me know how it is with you and yours, how my Wife does and Sir John Pringle, and our other Friends.

With sincerest Esteem, I am, my dear friend

Yours most affectionately,

B. Franklin

The reference to David Hume's Christian virtues is a typical piece of tongue-in-cheek Franklin humour. Along these lines, Franklin would undoubtedly have enjoyed the "canonisation" of Hume represented by "St. David's Street" as the location of Hume's house (fig. 14).

There is a charming letter from Franklin to Hume in the National Library of Scotland, combining experimental science with philosophical humour that epitomises the rapport between the two men. I was delighted to present a facsimile of the letter to the Library of the APS (figs. 15–16).

Franklin's correspondence with Hume related to his publication in the *Proceedings* of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, of which David Hume was joint secretary. Subsequently the Philosophical Society was absorbed into the Royal Society of Edinburgh, founded in 1783, and Franklin was the first foreigner elected to the Fellowship of the new society in 1783. Clearly he was much appreciated in Edinburgh.

Franklin was royally treated in Scotland. The City of Edinburgh bestowed its highest honour on him, and he was entertained in some of the grand houses of the nobility. In 1759 he stayed with Lord Kames in the Scottish Borders. His thank-you letter speaks from the heart and makes plain his enthusiasm for Scotland.

My son joins with me in the most respectful compliments to you and to Lady Kames. Our conversation till we came to York, was chiefly a recollection of what we had seen and heard, the pleasure we had enjoyed, and the kindnesses we had received in Scotland, and how far that country had exceeded our expectations. On the whole, I must say, I think the time we spent there, was six weeks of the densest happiness I have met with in any part of my life; and the agreeable



FIGURE 14. Thomas H. Shepherd, *St. Andrew Square*. Reproduced courtesy of RCAHMS (from Shepherd, *Modern Athens*, 1829).

and instructive society we found there in such plenty, has left so pleasing an impression on my memory, that did not strong connexions draw me elsewhere, I believe Scotland would be the country I should choose to spend the remainder of my days in.

Another congenial host was Sir Alexander Dick, who lived at Prestonfield House, adjoining the Royal Park of Holyrood (fig. 17). The house still stands but, in our more commercial days, it is now a country house hotel. While at Prestonfield Franklin struck a lively friendship with his host's ten-year-old daughter, Janet, and this led to a pair of poems, in which Franklin's verse is echoed in very spirited fashion by his young friend:<sup>6</sup>

Joys of Prestonfield adieu,  
 Late found, soon lost, but still will view  
 The engaging scene—Oft to those eyes  
 Shall the pleasing vision rise,  
 Hearts to warm towards a friend,  
 Kindness on kindness without end  
 Easy converse, Sprightly wit  
 These we found in Dame and Knight.

<sup>6</sup>James Bennett Nolan, *Benjamin Franklin in Scotland and Ireland 1759 and 1771* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1956).

Dear Sir,

London, May 19. 1762.

It is no small Pleasure to me, to hear from you that my Paper on the means of preserving Buildings from Damage by Lightning, was acceptable to the Philosophical Society. Mr. Ruffel's Proposals of Improvement are very sensible & just. A Leaden Spout or Pipe is undoubtedly a good Conductor so far as it goes. If the Conductor enters the Ground just at the Foundation, and from thence is carried horizontally to some Well, or to a distant Rod driven downright into the Earth; I would then propose that the Part under Ground should be Lead, as less liable to consume with Rust than Iron. Because if the Conductor near the Foot of the Wall should be wasted, the Lightning might act on the Moisture of the Earth, & by suddenly rarifying it occasion an Explosion that may damage the Foundation. In the Experiment of discharging my large Case of Electrical Bottles thro' a Piece of small Glass Tube fill'd with Water, the suddenly rarify'd Water has exploded with a Force equal, I think to that of so much Gunpowder; bursting the Tube into many Pieces, and driving them with Violence in all Directions & to all Parts of the Room. The Shivering of Trees into small Splinters like Broom, is probably owing to this Rarefaction of the Sap in the longitudinal Pores or capillary Pipes in the Substance of the Wood. And the Blowing-up of Bricks or Stones in a Hearth, Rending Stones out of a Foundation, and

Splitting

David Hume, Esq

FIGURE 15. Letter of Benjamin Franklin to David Hume, 19 May 1762, recto. Reproduced by permission of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from the RSE's Hume Bequest, held on deposit at the National Library of Scotland. NLS MS.23155.30 (RSE Hume Calendar Ref: V, 30).

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World, arises you know from the various Proportions of the Quantity to the Demand. We are told that Gold & Silver in Solomon's Time were so plenty as to be of no more Value in his Country than the Stones in the Street. You have now at present just such a Plenty of the same. Your People are therefore not to be surpris'd for desiring no more among them than they have; and if I have any, I should certainly carry it where from its Scarcity it may probably come to a better Market.

I nevertheless regret extremely the leaving a Country in which I have receiv'd so much Friendship, & Friends whose Conversation has been so agreeable and so improving to me; and that I am henceforth to reside at so great a Distance from them is no small Mortification to

My dear Friend,

Yours most affectionately  
B. Franklin

My respectful Compliments to  
if you please to Sir Alex<sup>r</sup> Dick,  
Lord Kames, Mr. Alexander,  
Mr. Ruffel, & any other enquiring  
Friends. — I shall write to them  
before I leave the Island.

FIGURE 16. Letter of Benjamin Franklin to David Hume, 19 May 1762, verso. Reproduced by permission of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from the RSE's Hume Bequest, held on deposit at the National Library of Scotland. NLS MS.23155.30 (RSE Hume Calendar Ref: V, 30).



FIGURE 17. *Prestonfield House*. Reproduced with acknowledgment to Peter Stubbs, [www.edinphoto.org.uk](http://www.edinphoto.org.uk).

Cheerful meals and balmy rest  
 Beds that never Bugs mollest  
 Neatness and sweetness all around  
 Those at Prestonfield we found  
 Hear O Heaven the Stranger's Prayer  
 Bless the hospitable pair  
 Bless their sweet bairns and very soon  
 Grant these a Brother those a Son.

\* \* \*

What Franklin writes appears so fine  
 I wish his thoughts and words were mine  
 Why then so cruel couldst thou be  
 As send his sprightly lines to me.  
 Our prayers and sentiments the same,  
 I love the Knight adore the Dame.

Unlike alone is this our vow  
 He prays for one Son, I for two.  
 But see for all he pleased to say  
 Your beauty could not make him stay  
 A Lover gone you'll understand  
 Is not so good as one at hand.

## SCOTLAND AND LONDON

Franklin's Scottish connections are by no means limited to his two visits. Once he had made friends in Scotland, he carried on an extensive correspondence, and he also met many of them when business took them to London. In fact there was a strong Scottish circle, based in the capital, the most notable member being Sir John Pringle, who became a close friend of Franklin. They made two European tours together and their friendship lay behind a famous episode in scientific history.

In 1778 there was a controversy over the best shape for lightning conductors, whether they should be round or pointed. King George III appointed a committee headed by Sir John Pringle, as president of the Royal Society, to investigate. The committee duly reported in favour of pointed conductors, as advocated by Benjamin Franklin. This displeased the king, for whom Franklin was an American traitor, and he promptly sacked Pringle as president of the Royal Society. Pringle uttered the immortal words "Your Majesty can alter the laws of the land but you cannot alter the laws of nature."<sup>7</sup>

Another prominent Scot in London was the well-known publisher William Strahan. Franklin knew him well and would have met other Scots at his house, including David Hume.

An indication that Scottish intellectual hospitality extended south of the border is the following extract from the diary of James Boswell: "I am really the great man now. I have had David Hume in the forenoon and Mr Johnson in the afternoon of the same day visiting me. Sir John Pringle, Dr Franklin and some more company dined with me today, and Mr Johnson and Lord Oglethorpe one day."

The attentive reader will note that the visits of Dr. Johnson did not overlap with those of Hume or Pringle. This is no accident. Johnson disapproved of their theological views, as Boswell would have known. Franklin was probably tarred with the same brush.

Partly through his friendship with Pringle, Franklin was fully aware of the eminence of the medical school at Edinburgh University. In this period Edinburgh had overtaken Leyden as the leading medical centre in Europe. It had a succession of brilliant teachers (Cullen, Black, and Munro) who, with the active support of Principal Robertson, attracted large numbers of medical students from all over the world. The University of Edinburgh had, in these days, around eight hundred students, of whom four hundred were in medicine. Of these 10 percent were Amer-

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<sup>7</sup> While this story circulates in scientific circles, I have failed to authenticate it. The *DNB* merely says that Pringle resigned the presidency on grounds of ill-health. This sounds suspiciously euphemistic and reminiscent of current politicians who resign to "spend more time with their families."

icans; most of the early medical institutions in America were founded by Edinburgh graduates.

A notable example is Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, who dramatised the serious life of Edinburgh medical students by saying, "Medicine is my wife; science is my mistress; books are my companion; study is my grave."

Franklin played an important role in encouraging the flow of young Americans to Edinburgh to study medicine. He used his Scottish contacts to provide introductions, and in several instances his help went much further. It is probably true to say that the most tangible outcome of Franklin's visits to Scotland was their effect on medical training in America.

Less tangible but also important in historical terms was the role that Scotland played in Franklin's political philosophy. All the time he was involved in the tortuous political negotiations between England and its American colonies, Franklin had in mind analogies with Scotland. The English-Scottish settlement seemed to him to provide a suitable template for the American context.<sup>8</sup> He was saddened when this route was not taken and hostilities followed. His friendship with Hume became strained but just survived. A footnote to the story: a few weeks before he died, David Hume gave his last formal dinner party for his friends, including Adam Smith. The date was 4 July 1776.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am very grateful to Peter Jones FRSE for his general advice on the Scottish Enlightenment, and for sharpening the historical accuracy of this article.

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<sup>8</sup> Franklin would no doubt have approved of Scottish Devolution and the re-establishment of its parliament.