9. IDENTITY AND INNOVATION:
HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT

David Allan

Few times and places today enjoy a greater reputation for intellectual significance than Scotland in the age of the Enlightenment. This situation, however, is nothing new, for famous contemporaries virtually queued to heap praise on the country and its inhabitants. Voltaire observed, albeit with more than a hint of sarcasm, that “It is from Scotland that we receive rules of taste in all the arts—from the epic poem to gardening”.¹ Thomas Jefferson, clearly an authority on such matters, estimated that for scientific learning “No place in the World can pretend to a competition with Edinburgh”.² The novelist Tobias Smollett, meanwhile, hailed the Scottish capital as “a hotbed of genius”.³ Subsequently the claims made for Scotland’s people in the first century after the Treaty of Union with England in 1707 have scarcely moderated. Indeed two scholars have recently proposed that the Scottish Enlightenment was where modernity itself was born: in this view our own world is a product of the psychological revolution wrought by David Hume and the invention of social science by his close friends Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson.⁴

Hume himself, the most original Scottish thinker of the period, was well placed to assess the nature and significance of these developments. In a letter to a friend, for example, the publisher William Strahan, in August 1770, he asserted that “I believe this is the historical Age and this the historical Nation”.⁵ The sense of patriotic pride here is palpable. Moreover, that the judgment was offered in a candid private communication

indicates that Hume really did believe what he was saying. But what precisely did he mean? Why had he come to think that the Scots possessed a unique talent for the study of the past? And what might this observation imply about the relationship between contemporary Scottish historiography and the country’s own peculiar history and circumstances? These are important questions to consider if we wish to understand the contribution made by the Scots to the development of historical scholarship in the long eighteenth century.

Existential Anxiety and Scotland’s Useable Past

As Hume well knew, historiography already had an exceptionally long and complex history in Scotland, stretching back at least as far as the ninth or tenth centuries when the Mac Alpin dynasty had first created Alba, the entity which later became the Kingdom of the Scots. This fact mattered greatly to Hume and his contemporaries. Above all, it emphasised to people who were themselves coming to terms with the unknown implications of the Anglo-Scottish Treaty of Union of 1707 that their nation had always been a furiously contested construct. Scotland had in fact struggled from the beginning to assert its autonomy against the expansionist English monarchs who dominated much of the rest of Britain. And from the earliest times, owing to various accidents of migration, conquest and cultural assimilation, what became Scotland had also lacked convincing internal coherence. Accordingly, the creation and control of a plausible narrative about the historical experiences of the kingdom’s inhabitants had been of acute importance to ambitious rulers in search of an effective common identity.

The dominant ethnic group in early Alba actually called themselves “Scots”, and, as is obvious, they ultimately gave their name to the entire kingdom. Yet, crucially, it was widely acknowledged that they were not even natives: speaking a distinct Celtic language known as Gaelic, the Scots were initially confined to the west coast and, according to their own histories, imaginary or real, which Hume himself unhesitatingly embraced in the 1760s in remarking that they had “first been established in Ireland”, were actually recent arrivals. By contrast, the Picts, a non-Gaelic-speaking Celtic people who had accepted Mac Alpin rule by the mid-ninth century,

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