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John Carlyle: The Scottish Enlightenment and Colonial America

By John Wilson

Introduction. An article in the Docent Dispatch of January 2015, entitled *John Carlyle and the Scots in Colonial America*, noted the Scottish heritage of John Carlyle and described the commercial activities and business influence of the Scots in Colonial America. This article focuses on the educational activities and intellectual influence of the Scots during that time.

The article discusses the impact of Scottish thinking and educators on Colonial America and the intellectual and philosophical basis for some of the concepts contained in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Certainly, there were many streams flowing from many sources for the ideas expressed in those historic documents. While not denying the relevance of other important sources and avoiding Scottish exceptionalism, this article highlights the Scottish streams – which have, at least -- excellent salmon.

Background: Scotland’s Golden Age and the Scottish Enlightenment. It seems that almost every country has a period of time during which it shines more brightly than others and produces more than its fair share of notable citizens. For Scotland one such time has been called “the Scottish Enlightenment”, to describe the period between

the 1730s and the 1790s when Scotland became one of the intellectual powerhouses of Europe” [1.a]. This period and the characterization of it being an “Enlightenment” was not unique to Scotland, since bursts of intellectual energy and creativity were also being seen in other countries during that same general time period. They all shared two key attributes of the “Enlightenment” -- independent thinking and tolerance for the views of others [1.b]. Scotland’s experience was special in range, depth and quality. It included:

Adam Smith often cited as the father of economics

Adam Ferguson and John Miller as founders of the field of study now termed sociology

James Hutton in geology

David Hume often identified as one of the greatest philosopher of his time [1.c]

More importantly and more relevant for this article, is the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on Colonial America. However, while discussing Scottish influence, some paradoxes should also be noted:

Most Scots in the Colonies were loyalist [2.a] –John Carlyle being an important but not the only notable exception – while the writings of Scottish intellectuals and the work of Scottish educators provided a firm

philosophical basis for independence [3.a].

Most Scots, as businesspersons in a predominantly English colony, were not well liked in Colonial America [2.b].

However, ideas emanating from Scottish intellectuals were widely embraced and shared by many American leaders [3.b].

[The attitude of Colonial Americans toward Scots is described in the January 2015 Docent Dispatch]

The Golden Age of the Scottish Enlightenment provides a reason for learning about the influence of a small country that the Edinburgh Review, in 1824, called:

“a little shabby scraggy corner of a remote island with a climate which cannot ripen an apple” [2.c].

The Trans-Atlantic Highway: Commerce and Ideas. By the Eighteenth century the Atlantic Ocean was a watery highway, “a vast oceanic thoroughfare across which human beings, commodities and *ideas* flowed constantly back and forth between the Old World and the New” [1.d]. Because of the vibrant and very profitable tobacco trade, we know quite a bit about the strong economic linkage between Scotland and Colonial America, particularly in the Middle Atlantic region. In the late 1730s the Scottish trade accounted for only 10% of the British total but by the late 1760s, it was almost 52% and by that time Glasgow --not London -- was the first tobacco port in the British Isles [2.d].

Ideas. Perhaps less well known are the cultural and educational linkages between Scotland and Colonial America. The increased trade and wealth, at least in western Scotland, supported an environment that was conducive to expanded educational and cultural pursuits. The large number of shipping fleets – perhaps some even owned

by or carrying goods sent by John Carlyle --not only carried tobacco, cotton and sugar -- but also people, newspapers, books and pamphlets. During this period there was also an increased Scottish emigration to Colonial America, including a high percentage of college or university educated young men as well as a growth in enrollment of American students in Scottish universities, particularly for medical studies [2.e].

Education. As noted by James Munson in his book on John Carlyle, “in the Age of Enlightenment, education was a must” [4.a]. Munson describes the trip that John Carlyle took to England in the Spring of 1750 with William Henry Fairfax and William Beverly who were taking their sons to enroll them in private schools in Yorkshire, England. It is surmised by Mr. Munson that “this trip reinforced John’s feelings that his sons should have an English education” [4.b]. However, by the time that John’s sons might have been of a suitable age, attending a university in England would not have been the only option that a parent might consider for obtaining a quality education in the British Isles.

The intellectual migration between America and the British Isles and/or Europe flowed both ways in the Colonial period. Several hundred Americans traveled abroad for their education. Most of the Americans traveling East were Catholics, heading for Catholic colleges in Europe. However, of the non-Catholics, about 44% studied at the Scottish Universities. They were attracted by the increasing fame of the Scottish Institutions, with most of the students coming from the Chesapeake Bay area, and many hav-

ing a particular interest in medicine [1.e].

Literacy. The American students were studying in a country, which by the end of the eighteenth century, would become the first modern literate country in Europe. In 1696, Scotland’s Parliament had passed an “Act for Setting Schools,” establishing a school in every parish in Scotland not already equipped with one. The purpose was primarily to ensure that everyone could read the Bible. By 1720, the year of John Carlyle’s birth, male literacy was estimated to be around 55 percent and by 1750 it may have stood as high as 75 percent, compared with only 53 percent in England. [5]

Benjamin Franklin. One of biggest American boosters of the quality of Scottish education was Benjamin Franklin -- successful businessman, inventor, scientist, governor, ambassador, philosopher and intellectual. He visited Scotland twice and was in continual correspondence with many leaders of the Scottish enlightenment. He characterized Edinburgh’s professors as being: **“a set of truly great men as ever appeared in one age or country”** [3.c].

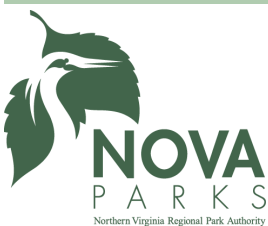
Franklin founded the College of Philadelphia which later became the University of Pennsylvania. Engraved in the archway of the medical school at the University of Pennsylvania is the Scottish thistle, a tribute to Scottish influence on Colonial academic medical studies [1.f]. Dr. Franklin visited Scotland in the late summer of 1759; received his honorary doctorate from Saint Andrew’s University; and enjoyed meeting many of the luminaries of the Scottish Enlightenment. Dr. Franklin later stated, in a letter to his Scottish hosts, that:

“did not strong connections draw me elsewhere, I believe that Scotland would be the Country I should choose to spend the remainder of my days in” [2.f].

He visited Scotland again for about a month in the late autumn of 1771 and had toured Scotland for 6 weeks in the late summer of 1759 -- but there is no record of Dr. Franklin spending any time in Scotland during the cold winter months. Some years later, however, Franklin did spend several years abroad -- in Paris, France -- perhaps yet another indication that he was indeed a wise and practical intellectual.

Thomas Jefferson referred to Edinburgh as having the finest university in the world. It should also be noted that Jefferson had several Scottish tutors, most notably Willian Small, about whom Jefferson said: **“he probably fixed the destinies of my life”**. Jefferson’s famous library contained books by the prominent Scottish philosophers [3.c]. Even an esteemed European luminary, Voltaire, believed that Scotland was now the leader of progressive thought in this era [1.g]. It should be noted that John Carlyle’s library included a set of books by Voltaire.

Political Philosophy: Politics and Religion. The intellectual environment in and around Edinburgh that Jefferson so greatly admired was populated by moral philosophers, most notably **Reverend Francis Hutcheson**. Moral philosophy was a broad field of study that included natural theology -- the search for design in the universe-- ethics, jurisprudence and political economy. There was also a group of practical philosophers, including Thomas Reid and Adam Ferguson, who called their philosophy Common Sense realism. Most of the Scottish philosophers were teachers and through their lectures as well as



their publications directly influenced their students, some of whom were from America as well as from Scotland [1.h]. Hutcheson's most famous student was another Scot -- Adam Smith, the eccentric and absent minded but brilliant economist, who argued against the prevailing British mercantile system in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* [pp. 576-82]. Smith argued that Britain would profit more if the colonies were independent [3.d]. His book was published in 1776 – a significant year for America.

Hutcheson argued that all governments exist for the good of the governed. He believed in the right of colonies to resist unjust rulers and to turn independent when the mother country resorts to “severe and unjust policies”. John Locke, the English political philosopher-- is often credited with being a primary source of ideas that found expression in the Declaration of Independence. The writings of Hutcheson, who was influenced by Locke, added the independence perspective of a colony resisting tyranny. Thomas Reid held that certain moral truths were “self-evident” and Adam Ferguson held that Great Britain’s colonial subjects were endowed with the same natural rights enjoyed by Englishmen [3.e].

A large part of the influence of, and knowledge about, the Scottish philosophers in Colonial America was due to the work of educators in America, many of whom were ordained clergymen. There were many factors driving the transfer of intellectual capital from Scotland to America, as a result of the emigration of doctors, lawyers, government administrators and other professionals. However, of all the educated professional groups, it was the clergymen who had the greatest impact [1.i]. This was a result of their high status in Colonial society. In the eighteenth century religion was a pervasive facet of everyday life. The clergy had wide influence not only in spiritual

matters but they were also key figures in the political arena and published as well as preached on a wide range of topics including imperial politics, education and government affairs. In addition, they also worked as schoolmasters, university teachers and university presidents. The list of influential Scottish clergy included James Blair who served a long term as president of William and Mary College from 1693; William Smith, first provost of the Philadelphia College (which later became the University of Pennsylvania) and John Witherspoon, president of what became Princeton University. They shaped the curriculum for their schools and, as educators, they assigned the works of the Scottish philosophers to their students and discussed their ideas in their lectures.

John Knox Witherspoon was by far the most influential and most prominent of the Scottish clergymen. In 1766 he accepted an offer to come to America and serve as president and professor at what was then called the College of New Jersey. He immediately set about completely redoing the college curriculum according to the Scottish model that he had used at Glasgow. The Scottish philosophers – including Hutcheson -- were put on the required reading list. Under his dynamic leadership the university was transformed from a small seminary for training protestant clergymen to a breeding ground for a great number of American statesmen, including James Madison, fourth president of the United States. In addition to educating a future president and vice-president, his students included 37 judges (three of whom became justices of the [U.S. Supreme Court](#)); 10 Cabinet officers; 12 members of the Continental Con-

gress, 28 U.S. senators, and 49 United States congressmen. Madison was a very influential person in shaping the Constitution of the United States. Indeed he is often cited as being the Father of the Constitution as well as being the author of the Bill of Rights. It is said that James Madison spoke French with a Scottish accent, as a result of having learned the language from his Scottish tutor, Donald Robertson, with whom he boarded for five years [3.f].

John Witherspoon, in addition to influencing others through his role as an educator, was a strong advocate for independence as well as being politically active. He served as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress and was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. At the Second Continental Congress, John Dickinson objected to what he viewed as a hasty move toward independence by saying that the time was not yet ripe for it. John Witherspoon famously replied [6], that the country

"was not only ripe for the measure, but in danger of rotting for the want of it."
Thomas Paine and Common Sense.

Another interesting connection between Scottish philosophy and the American Revolution involves Thomas Paine. Before coming to America, Thomas Paine attended a series of lectures in London given by one of the common sense Scottish philosopher, Adam Ferguson. Later, after arriving in America, Thomas Paine wrote one of the most influential pamphlets ever published. It sold an estimated half a million copies in six months just before the revolution. He called it **Common Sense** [3.g]. In a William and Mary Quarterly article, Sophia Rosenfeld states that Thomas Paine was "highly innovative in his use of the commonplace notion of "common sense". He synthesized various philosophical and political uses of the term in a way that permanently impacted American political

thought. He used two ideas from **Scottish Common Sense Realism**: that ordinary people can indeed make sound judgments on major political issues, and that there exists a body of popular wisdom that is readily apparent to anyone" [7].

John Carlyle and the Presbyterian Church. John Carlyle did not attend a university either in Great Britain or in America. So he would not have been in the classes taught by Scottish Presbyterian educators, such as John Witherspoon, James Blair or William Smith. However, John Carlyle was a staunch Presbyterian and as such, he most likely knew of them and perhaps even knew of their teachings on liberty and independence – after all Scots are a clannish group. Carlyle was involved in building the **Presbyterian Meeting House** in Alexandria. Carlyle was a Presbyterian dissenter in the state of Virginia, where it was typically more advantageous to be an Anglican. In Virginia the Anglican Church was part of the establishment and a person had to be a member of the Anglican Church in order to serve as a government official. John Carlyle, although a Presbyterian, was also a member of the Anglican community and even owned a pew in Christ Church. He was able to serve as a militia officer and also as a justice of the peace. Virginians were required to attend Anglican services at least once a month or else be fined. John Carlyle was never fined [8].

In addition to the Presbyterian clergymen preaching in support of independence, the egalitarian organizational structure of the Presbyterian Church has also been cited as influencing the governmental structure established in the United States Consti-

tution. The Presbyterian Church was founded on democratic principles, unlike the Anglican Church, which had a hierarchical structure with appointed bishops and the reigning monarch being the head of the church. In the Presbyterian Church every member of a parish had a vote to elect the elders who elected members of the Synod who then elected members to the General Assembly. This multi-tiered representative Presbyterian structure, in which John Carlyle probably participated, foreshadowed the multi-layered local, state and national representative government established in the Constitution of the United States [3.h]. It is not clear that John Carlyle, a very busy and successful businessman, devoted a great deal of time to reading or reflecting on the philosophical grounds and intellectual basis for American independence. Regardless of his understanding and motivation, we do know that he acted decisively in support of the patriotic cause. And in the end -- actions speak louder than words.

As mentioned above in the **Introduction** to this article, the purpose is not to diminish or minimize the many different threads of thought and the many divergent philosophical patterns that have been woven together to form the fabric of the United States of America. It is simply to focus on some enlightened Scottish philosophical weavers and their tartan thought patterns.

Acknowledgements: Much of the material in this article came from the following sources:

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