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Ancients, Moderns and the Scottish Enlightenment: an overview

The Scottish Enlightenment is not normally associated with classical scholarship. The conventional view is that intellectual life in eighteenth-century Scotland was dominated by the rise of the social sciences, especially political economy, as well as the natural sciences. While eighteenth-century Scotland is recognised as having played a vital role in the making of modernity, its immersion in the world of classical scholarship tends to be overlooked, except in so far as neoclassicism provided a model for cultural emulation, as, for example, in the architecture of Edinburgh's New Town. Nevertheless, other facets of the eighteenth-century Scottish engagement with the classics have slipped from view. Authors associated with the Scottish Enlightenment published on classical themes, such as Greek or Roman history or ancient philosophy; the Foulis Press in Glasgow achieved widespread fame for its superlative editions of classical texts; and in Scottish academic life, and within the professions of law and medicine, Latin continued to maintain a considerable grip over academic and professional exercises, orations, theses and the like throughout the eighteenth century, indeed into the nineteenth. Throughout the period from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, Scots confronted a range of classical themes, including some which pertained particularly to Scotland. For instance, there was much discussion of the indigenous tradition of Scottish neo-Latin literature, and its foremost exponents George Buchanan and Arthur Johnston. Figures such as Archibald Pitcairne and Thomas Ruddiman tried to perpetuate the traditions of Scottish neo-Latin literature into the age of Enlightenment. In addition, Scottish antiquaries from the late seventeenth century onwards were fascinated by the legacy of Roman archaeology in Scotland, most especially the Antonine Wall as a terminus between Roman *imperium* and ancient Caledonian freedom. A kind of 'Agricolomania' entranced Scottish antiquarians throughout the period. The classical obsessions of the Scottish Enlightenment were captured by Sir Walter Scott in the *Waverley* Novels in the early nineteenth century, in figures such as Baron Bradwardine (in *Waverley*) and Triptolemus Yellowley (in *The Pirate*). Moreover, Jonathan Oldbuck the central character in Scott's *The Antiquary* is a delusional Agricolamaniac. There was also an ongoing rivalry between Edinburgh University and the High School, under Alexander Adam, over how standards of Scottish classicism – not least the command of the ancient languages and Greek in particular – might best be preserved and enhanced. The focus of the universities on the philosophy and history of the classical world to the exclusion of philology and grammar created opportunities for the schools, such as Edinburgh Academy, founded in 1824, whose priorities were different.

The reasoning and the beliefs that informed this extensive appropriation of the classical heritage by Enlightenment Scots have received far less attention than might be expected. Scots' interest in the ancient world was not unreflective, but mediated by sophisticated and complex ideas on a very broad range of issues, from the correct standards of literary taste, to the foundations of moral philosophy and the principles of the historical evolution of societies from ancient barbarism to modern refinement. Scottish discussions of classical antiquity were also shaped by the influential, pan-European dispute, beginning in the late seventeenth century, between 'Ancients' and 'Moderns', whether classical antiquity represented an intellectual and cultural model that ought to be emulated in the modern world.