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## "Minds that Move at Large': A Scottish Perspective on Collegiate Literary Societies, Past and Present"

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**"MINDS THAT MOVE AT LARGE:" A SCOTTISH PERSPECTIVE ON  
COLLEGIATE LITERARY SOCIETIES, PAST AND PRESENT**

An address for Rhetor '86: the convention of the National Association of Collegiate Literary Societies, in Columbia, S.C., October 10, 1986.

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Mr. Chairman, members of the societies:

It was both with pleasure and trepidation that I accepted your invitation to speak tonight--pleasure, because of the enjoyment and profit I myself received from student literary societies, and trepidation, because my experience was on the face of it so distant from, so much more rudimentary than, the rich and developed traditions of the American collegiate societies you represent. My own experience was long ago, and in another country. To my surprise, it is now nearly thirty years since I first discovered the pleasures of formal debate at weekly meetings of a society always called "The Lit.", founded as recently as 1876,--nearly thirty years, therefore, since I first took part in those venerable liturgies of British debate, private business and points of order and points of privilege and an annual motion condemning capital punishment. It is twenty-five years since I was elected to two still more recent and cosier essay clubs that met in alternate weeks to read and to debate papers by members on general and historical topics respectively. As Virgil writes, O mihi praeteritos referat si Jupiter annos--Would that the gods might give back to me the years that are no more. In the decades since then, until tonight, I have never participated in any student literary society, yet it was in such early experience that I first discovered many

of my continuing intellectual interests, as I am sure many of you have discovered, through your own societies, interests and abilities of continuing value. So, though I am honoured to talk about the tradition of British literary societies, still I am painfully conscious that my own experience can hardly provide an adequate empirical basis for such a talk.

But I have been comforted by realizing that in any case the English tradition I experienced was not historically the ancestor of American societies like yours. As historians of the American revolution and of American higher education increasingly recognize, we are much more likely to find the roots of American institutions if we look, not to England, but north of the border to Scotland.

Scotland does not now seem very impressive on the world map. It is, as the Edinburgh Review once owned, "a little, shabby, scrap of a remote island, with a climate that cannot ripen an apple;" yet, two centuries ago, it was Scotland that became the intellectual seedbed of Enlightenment for the whole of the English-speaking world, for reasons directly relevant to this convention. It was in Scotland that America's founding fathers found enlightened and generalizable discussion of the abstract basis of government; it was in the essays of the Scottish philosopher David Hume that the Federalist writers found their arguments on the nature of representative government; it was in the universities of Scotland that American colleges found a modern philosophical approach to the old subject of rhetoric and literary criticism; and it was from the Scottish universities that American colleges took the rhetorical textbooks on which, in the early 19th century, American collegiate literary taste would be formed. Here at South Carolina, for instance, the first curriculum included the Scottish textbooks by Hugh Blair and Lord Kames; the first

professor of rhetoric here defined his subject on the Scottish enlightenment model as "the Philosophical Principles of Rhetoric and Criticism;" and one of the only speakers ever to deliver more than once the annual oration to the combined literary societies of this college was a South Carolinian graduate from my own university of Edinburgh, Robert Henry, who also served for a time as our professor of rhetoric.

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So there are good historical reasons for turning our attention (on an occasion such as this) to Scotland; it is the more appropriate in that the University of South Carolina is, under my senior colleague Professor Ross Roy, one of the leading centers in North America for Scottish literary studies; yet even were the historical links less numerous than they are, even were the American collegiate literary societies a wholly spontaneous growth owing nothing to transatlantic influence, Scottish or English, Roman or Greek, the examples I shall advance ~~and the analogies I shall suggest~~ will, I believe, make it worth our while to look backwards for a short while to two influential eighteenth-century Scottish literary societies, and to contrast them with the limitations, the snobbishness, the artificiality, I had almost said the decadence, of the nineteenth-century English societies such as the Oxford or Cambridge Union that so successfully hog the international limelight.

Eighteenth-century Edinburgh was a city of literary clubs. When, in 1718, the poet Allan Ramsay wrote the city's answer to those who claimed to prefer rural life, he included among the pleasures of the Northern capital participation in "witty clubs of minds that move at large," and it is on this sense of productive playfulness that I first want to focus. Ramsay himself belonged to a club of "minds that moved at large," one called from its reconstitution in 1711 the Easy Club, a small group of remarkably learned people from many different intellectual backgrounds who met

regularly to discuss each other's writing and to read such current literature as the pamphlets of Swift or the Spectator essays. The Easy Club's membership included a couple of Scottish historians; a physician and medical professor Archibald Pitcairn; a lawyer; the Scottish Latinist and editor Thomas Ruddiman; and Ramsay himself, who was wigmaker by trade and poet by avocation.

The Club had originated in revulsion from purely political debate. In Ramsay's own words, it had originated "in the antipathy we all of that day seemed to have at the ill-humour and contradiction which rise from trifles, especially those which constitute Whig and Tory." As he wrote in a poem "To the Most Happy Members of the Easy Club."

All faction in the Church or State  
 With greater wisdom still you hate,  
 And leaved learn'd fools there to debate,--  
 Like rocks in seas you're easy . . .

But in fact the club's easy or relaxed attitude to political disputes was substantially helped by all the members sharing essentially the same politics--they were rock-like in current debates, because they were firmly anti-Unionist <sup>anti-Engl-lyst</sup> and, in varying degrees, pro-Jacobite, *pro-Scottish*.

This self-conscious Scottishness came out in the pseudonyms members took for the club's proceedings. Ramsay himself, for instance, who went first under the English, Swiftian soubriquet of Isaac Bickerstaff soon changed to that of the fifteenth-century Scottish poet and classical translator, Gawain Douglas. The Club not only encouraged Ramsay in his extraordinary experiments in Scotticizing Horace and classical pastoral, but also in creating a new genre of vernacular Scottish satiric verses on Edinburgh life, and in gathering and editing the Scottish literature of

past centuries in his two editions, The Ever Green and the Tea-Table Miscellany. Indeed, it was the Easy Club that underwrote many of Ramsay's early publications.

*tribute to lit. magazine + Caroline Mary Lennox + Corry*  
*intent a review sketch*

Now the Easy Club was but one of a score of such societies in early eighteenth-century Edinburgh, each with its own emphasis and tone. I am not myself a specialist in this period, but my wife, Dr. Mary Jane Scott, is, and she points out how these literary groups proliferated and mixed and overlapped long before the famous golden age of Edinburgh's Enlightenment in the middle and later part of the century. The Victorian theorist of civilization, Henry Buckle, argued that the Scottish Enlightenment of Hume and Ferguson and Adam Smith was a kind of displaced religion, that it had its origin in secularizing the religious disputatiousness of seventeenth-century Scotland; we, at a gathering such as this one, might rather wish to argue that the origins of Edinburgh's extraordinary mid-century intellectual preeminence lay in these literary societies, in the playful, relaxed and informal exploration of ideas.

Certainly the societies were enormously fruitful and influential. Ramsay himself belonged to a second literary group, the Worthy Club, for which he wrote his Scottish pastoral, the Gentle Shepherd; it was at the Worthy Club that a more widely-known eighteenth-century poet, James Thomson, read his early essays, and it was there that Thomson met the Scottish landscape painter William Aikman, who influenced his poetic descriptions. Another member of the Easy Club, Thomas Ruddiman, founded in 1718 the Society for Improving Classical Studies, which with an admirable disregard for disciplinary boundaries discussed not only literature, but philosophy and law as well. Along with the Worthy Club, Thomson was, as an undergraduate and divinity student, also a member of the Grotesque Club, where, we are told, "members use to submit their first essays in

composition to the friendly censure of their associates;" their aim was, as reported in Aaron Hill's Plain Dealer in 1724, to encourage:

a Friendship that Knows no Strife, but that of a generous  
Emulation to excell in Virtue, Learning and Politeness.

And Thomson was a member, too, of the Edinburgh Athenian Society, in the publications of which society many of the best Scottish poets of the generation after Ramsay's first got into print. As the preface to one of their collections notes, young Scottish writers, like young creative writers today, often felt discouraged by the culture within which they had to write:

But most they are expos'd to publick spite,  
Who in a rude and sullen country write.  
Ungen'rous minds, with Prejudice possest,  
Despise the Brave, and make their Works a Jest.

In providing relaxed opportunities for the exploration of ideas old and new, in encouraging young writers, and in helping young writers break into print, these early eighteenth-century literary societies, spontaneous, often short-lived, sometimes a bit pretentious, were surely of lasting importance.

But if we turn to the end of the century, to the seventeen-nineties, we find for the literary society a different and an intellectually tougher role. <sup>The</sup> society I have in mind had been founded in 1764 by six Edinburgh students, and the name that the students chose signifies how changed were their ambitions, for they took the name, not of an Easy Club or a Grotesque Club, but of the Speculative Society. This kind of shift in ambition was perhaps general, for its most famous late eighteenth-century rivals at Edinburgh were called the Dialectic and the Diagnostic. The Speculative

*insert a  
the Dialectic  
and  
the Diagnostic*

Society, or the 'Spec' as it was and is usually called, had been founded "for improvement in Literary Composition and Public Speaking," but its characteristic, like that of its contemporary societies, lay in the encouragement of intellectually rigorous and socially dangerous argument. As one of its most famous members, the Scottish judge and literary critic Francis Jeffrey, later recalled, at the Spec a student felt liberated from the moderate, common-sense conventional assumptions of his mentors and teachers:

free from scholastic restraint [Jeffrey remembered], and throwing off the thralldom of a somewhat servile docility, the mind first aspired to reason and question nature for itself--and half wondered at its own temerity, first ventured without a guide into the mazes of speculation, or tried its unaided flight into the regions of intellectual adventure, to revel uncontrolled through the light and boundless realms of literature and science.

Unlike English universities, where almost into the present century the emphasis long remained heavily literary, that is to say classical, the Scottish universities in the eighteenth century emphasized, even in their formal classes, the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of a very broad range of disciplines. The speculative and free-ranging attitude Jeffrey eulogizes was exemplified at one of the Spec's rival societies, the Academy of Physics, founded in 1797 "for the investigation of nature, the laws by which her phenomena are regulated, and the history of opinions concerning these laws." Even natural science was to be debated in terms of abstract principles and shifting opinion. (And indeed, within the year, the Academy of Physics was debating, not only the granite strata of a local river, but also reviews of recent literary publications and the need for



Scottish law reform.) It was an attitude served and fostered in the Scottish university lecture-rooms, but reaching its full strength and growth only in the freer atmosphere that the societies could provide. Among the famous members of the Speculative Society during the seventeen-nineties were, not just Jeffrey himself, but Sir Walter Scott the novelist, Henry Brougham the Utilitarian legal reformer, and Sydney Smith, the most famous polemicist of the early nineteenth-century, and the Society's later if less speculative luminaries would include Robert Louis Stevenson.

What Jeffrey's somewhat rosy retrospect omits or represses, however, is the fierce political context in which the Speculative Society achieved its preeminence. In 1789, the enlightened thinkers of Edinburgh had largely welcomed the French Revolution, and the Dialectic Society had in 1791 voted unanimously that the Revolution would be of more advantage than disadvantage to Europe. "Bliss was it in that [political] dawn to be alive, and to be young was very heaven."

*and I dwell on this only because many would admit the Society got scared at the prospect of splits + disruptions*

But in the succeeding years opinion veered. Young progressives were arraigned for sedition before the Scottish courts, and when one protested that Jesus Christ himself was a revolutionary, the judge responded only that Jesus Christ had been "hangit." Political patronage at the time lay in the hands of one Henry Dundas, who steered the Scottish governmental gravy-train for over thirty years, appointed all the judges, and essentially nominated all the members of parliament. Any taint of Whig progressivism ceased to be wise for a student's future career in state or in the state church. By 1794, even the Speculative Society had imposed upon itself a resolution prohibiting political debates.

Yet the speculative side of society life could not long remain repressed. By 1799, Jeffrey and his friends had precipitated a crisis with

their over-cautious senior members, the more Tory of whom thereupon resigned; the political prohibition was promptly rescinded; and the Spec. once again became the forum for a free exchange of political ideas, if of a rather one-sidedly progressive kind. It was out of that renewed liberation that Jeffrey, Smith, Brougham and others founded the most important new periodical of the early nineteenth-century, the Edinburgh Review, with its uncompromising and intransigent promise of utter intellectual incorruptibility. As the motto on its title-page read, Judex damnatur cum nocens absolvitur--the judge himself stands condemned when the guilty are given acquittal. Part of the lesson the Speculative Society holds for us today is that ideas and beliefs really can matter more than a society's social harmony or easiness.

important  
 ideas,  
 not people.

Quarter after quarter, the men of the Speculative Society thundered forth through the Review their revaluations of established tradition and conventional ideas, and their analyses gained national and international attention. Indeed only ten years or so after the Review had been started, by a group of young Scotsman still in their twenties, it was being recommended to students here at South Carolina as the research source for their compositions on modern political questions. As the French writer Madame de Stael remarked in 1815: "If some being from another [world] were to come to this, and desire to know in what work the highest pitch of human intellect might be found, he ought to be shown the Edinburgh Review." And that review, which transformed the nature of early nineteenth-century political debate, and arguably caused the reform of the British governmental system, and became famous and influential world-wide, was the outgrowth of a small and rather harried college literary society.

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From both my Scottish examples of eighteenth century Scottish literary societies, we may draw inspiration and example. On their model--

interdisciplinary, socially inclusive, philosophically easy, and irrepressibly speculative-- , many of the older American colleges founded similar societies, and on that model we in our turn may frame our activities and ambitions for modern literary societies, in discussion, in debate, in the sharing of creative writing, in the encouragement of fledgling publication.

And in a still longer time-perspective, the informal to-and-fro of the collegiate society should surely recall to us, not only the Athenian Society and its ilk from eighteenth-century Edinburgh, but the to-and-fro of its yet more classic original, the groves and walks of Academus in ancient Athens; though one must never underrate the benefits of formal rhetorical training, surely we who have once experienced the debates of a student literary society will acknowledge, along with great Cicero himself, that whatever rhetorical ability we may have largely came non ex rhetorum officinis, sed ex Academiae spatiis, "not from the workshops of the rhetoricians, but from the social meeting-grounds of Academe." / May that setting and that stimulus, through the energy and commitment of the societies convened here this weekend, long be offered to future generations in colleges across America.

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