

BOOK COVER

To Be Supplied

THE GLASGOW ENLIGHTENMENT

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Edited by
Andrew Hook and Richard B. Sher



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Acknowledgements

This collection of essays, the fourth volume in the 'Studies in Eighteenth-Century Scotland' series sponsored by the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society, originated in a conference on 'Glasgow and the Enlightenment' held at the University of Strathclyde in the summer of 1990. In that year, when Glasgow succeeded Paris as 'European City of Culture', what could have been more appropriate than to direct attention to the period when Glasgow first began to establish itself as a city worthy of European attention? For most of us in attendance, a more memorable conference would be difficult to imagine. Besides the conference papers, highlights included an evening walk along the Forth and Clyde Canal; an outing to Burns and Boswell country in Ayrshire, with an excursion to Robert Adam's Culzean Castle; a magnificent dinner and reception at Glasgow City Chambers, hosted by the Lord Provost of Glasgow; and a trip to Smollett country near Loch Lomond, concluding with dinner at Ross Priory, the University of Strathclyde's eighteenth-century estate on the banks of the loch, where guests heard a lecture-recital of Burns songs by John Davison, Shoshana Shay, and the late John Ashmead.

On behalf of the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society, the editors are happy to acknowledge the gracious hospitality and support that was given to our conference and our volume by a variety of individuals and organizations, including the city of Glasgow itself. We are particularly grateful to the University of Strathclyde — especially Hamish Fraser, Andrew Noble and the conference co-ordinator, Richard L. Peddie — for hosting

the 1990 conference with so much style, and to the University of Glasgow both for sponsoring Ian Ross's Stevenson Lecture and for providing generous financial support from its Publications Committee and MacFie Fund. Finally, we wish to thank John Tuckwell of Canongate Academic for giving us the opportunity to put the Glasgow Enlightenment into print.

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The University of Strathclyde is thanked for permission to reproduce Kay's John Anderson and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery for the reproduction of Lawrence's portrait of Dr John Moore. The Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow are thanked for permission to reproduce the other portraits.

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With acknowledgements to the Glasgow Room of the Mitchell Library, and Special Collections, Glasgow University Library.

Abbreviations

AUL	Aberdeen University Library
EUL	Edinburgh University Library
GLS	Glasgow Literary Society
GUA	Glasgow University Archives
GUL	Glasgow University Library
NLS	National Library of Scotland
SRO	Scottish Record Office

Introduction: Glasgow and the Enlightenment

Richard B. Sher and Andrew Hook

The Scottish Enlightenment was overwhelmingly concentrated in Scotland's three largest cities: Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen. These diverse urban settings encouraged the sociability for which eighteenth-century Scotland was justly famous. Clubs flourished, some formal and academic, others social and convivial. Taverns and bookshops were close at hand, and easy access to the sea and to frequently published newspapers and pamphlets put the inhabitants in close touch with the world. The leading literati of the Scottish Enlightenment were for the most part engaged, cosmopolitan townsmen, employed (with rare exceptions, such as David Hume) in the learned professions of law, medicine, the church and academia. Of the five Scottish universities that helped to nurture and sustain the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century, only St Andrews, and perhaps King's College in the village of Old Aberdeen, followed the pattern of the great English centres of learning at Oxford and Cambridge — small towns dominated by their ancient universities. The other three Scottish universities were urban institutions: the University of Edinburgh in the capital, Marischal College in the New Town of Aberdeen and the University of Glasgow in western's Scotland's largest city. Not coincidentally, they were also more progressive and dynamic institutions than St Andrews or King's. In these urban-academic

environments, native Scottish students mixed with young men sent to Scotland for their education from as near as England and Ireland, and as far as America and Russia.

It follows that an appreciation of the unique character of cultural, intellectual and social life in each of Scotland's three major cities and their surrounding regions is critically important for developing a deeper, comparative perspective on the nature of the Scottish Enlightenment. Yet scholarship of this kind is still in its infancy. It is true that the Enlightenment in Edinburgh has been the focus of numerous studies in recent years, and that the long neglected Aberdeen Enlightenment has suddenly spawned a formidable secondary literature.¹ But much remains to be done along these lines before a truly comparative study of the Scottish Enlightenment in its urban and regional contexts can be seriously contemplated. In the case of Aberdeen, for example, we now know a great deal about certain topics concerning three particular institutions — King's College, Marischal College and the Aberdeen Philosophical Society or Wise Club — but precious little is known about most of the Aberdeen literati themselves or about the relationship of the Scottish Enlightenment to other key institutions, such as the church and the town council.

It is in regard to Glasgow, however, that the inadequacy of scholarship on the discrete urban contexts of the Scottish Enlightenment is most evident. Despite a veritable publishing industry devoted to its most famous professor, Adam Smith, and modest amounts of specialist literature on some of its other thinkers and institutions, the Glasgow Enlightenment as such has been virtually ignored.² The purpose of this volume is to begin the process of making up for past neglect by examining some of the principal people and developments that made the Glasgow Enlightenment interesting and distinctive. Towards that end, we have

focused this collection on interactions among individuals, institutions, ideas and ideologies, particularly in so far as these seem to have some bearing on the peculiar cultural makeup of the Enlightenment in Glasgow.

I

WHAT KIND OF CITY was Glasgow in the eighteenth century, and how did its character affect the Enlightenment there? In the first place, it was a town of considerable vitality and growth. Around the middle of the century, Glasgow's population of perhaps 30,000 was roughly twice the size of Aberdeen but scarcely half that of Edinburgh. By 1800, however, the population had grown to about 80,000 — almost three times the size of Aberdeen and, for the first time, slightly more than Edinburgh.³ Demographic increases were matched by the physical expansion of the city, especially towards the west. This process of enlargement encompassed not only famous streets like Virginia Street (1753), Queen Street (1762) and Buchanan Street (1771) but also a broader, grid-like network of at least forty-eight new streets constructed between 1779 and 1815.⁴

It is tempting to attribute these developments to industrialization, since nineteenth-century Glasgow would become one of the great urban centres of the Industrial Revolution. David Dale — owner of the cotton spinning mill at New Lanark that would be made famous by his son-in-law, Robert Owen — and James Watt, of steam engine fame, are among the eighteenth-century residents of the city who may be cited in support of this claim. It should be remembered, however, that Dale was essentially a merchant-entrepreneur engaged in rural industry,⁵ and that Watt had to go to his partner Matthew Boulton's Birmingham in order to see his technological innovations machined into reality. Though manufacturing was

increasingly important during the second half of the eighteenth century, the key to Glasgow's prosperity and growth lay not in heavy/industry of the nineteenth-century variety but in small-scale industry and commerce, especially the carrying trade with the New World.

This point has important implications for understanding the disposition and even the very appearance of Glasgow. A commercial ethos permeated the city, giving it a much different atmosphere from the professional-aristocratic ambience ⁷ that characterized Edinburgh. The direction of Glasgow's commercial life is also significant: to a greater degree than east-coast cities that faced Europe, Glasgow had a western, Atlantic orientation. This distinction manifested itself in various ways, such as in the contrast between Aberdeen's extensive Scandinavian connections or Edinburgh's enormous Dutch influences — which generally encouraged politeness, toleration, social stability and sober religion and learning — and Glasgow's often unstaid relations with Ireland and the Americas. Finally, since eighteenth-century Glasgow possessed substantial commercial wealth without the heavy industry of later times, and since, in contrast to Edinburgh, relatively few physical remnants of the old city now exist, it is necessary to use one's visual imagination when trying to recapture the look and feel of Glasgow during the age of the Enlightenment. Rather than conjure up an image of the grimy industrial city of the early twentieth century, we must picture eighteenth-century Glasgow as a clean, prosperous and exceptionally handsome town.

That is how Daniel Defoe saw it as early as the mid-1720s. In *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–26), he praised the streets and buildings of Glasgow and called it 'the cleanest and beautifullest and best built' of British cities, London excepted. Defoe had a sharp eye for Glasgow's enormous commercial potential, particularly in regard to the growing trade with America. Leaving the

Firth of Clyde, he noted, Glasgow's ships were able to sail directly and without interruption to the American colonies; often they were at the capes of Virginia before London ships were clear of the English Channel. The shorter voyage meant significantly lower costs of transatlantic transportation for merchants from Glasgow, as opposed to London: 'Nay even in Times of Peace, [when there is no danger from privateers in the English Channel] and take the Weather to happen in its usual Manner, there must always be allow'd one Time with another, at least fourteen or twenty Days Difference in the Voyage, either Out or Home.'⁶ Defoe's estimate was correct, and its further implication was that in the summer sailing season vessels from Glasgow, unlike those from London and other English ports, could fit in two out-and-back Atlantic crossings, with obvious economic benefits.

The merchants of Glasgow, and the smaller ports further down the Clyde estuary, had not been backward in exploiting the advantages pointed out by Defoe. Even before the legalizing Act of Union of 1707, they had begun to develop their trade with America; since the latter part of the seventeenth century, the Clyde had been the centre of a profitable transatlantic contraband trade, particularly in tobacco. After the Union, the pace of development quickened. The London merchants' fear of this growing northern competition began to appear in the form of complaints about alleged irregularities in the Glasgow trade: custom dues, it was asserted, were not collected on the Clyde with the same rigour as in the South. In the end the government acted on these complaints, tightening up the Scottish revenue organization and replacing local Scottish officials with English ones.

The Glasgow tobacco trade continued to grow, however. In the early post-Union years, Glasgow's tobacco imports averaged about one and a half million pounds per annum.

In the 1720s this figure climbed to six million pounds. But the most startling development began in the 1740s, when tobacco imports rose from eight million pounds in 1741 to a record forty-seven million pounds in 1771. Two years earlier, Glasgow had become the leading tobacco port in the British Isles, importing just over half of Britain's supply. This highly profitable economic connection between the Firth of Clyde and the Chesapeake Bay played a crucial part in the material and commercial development of western Scotland. In Glasgow itself, it created the famous tobacco aristocracy, a group exercising enormous influence over nearly every aspect of the city's life.⁷ The so-called 'tobacco lords' built their splendid mansions on Virginia Street and were distinguished by their scarlet cloaks, curled wigs, cocked hats and gold-headed canes.

More was at issue, however, than the creation of a wealthy commercial élite. The link between economic prosperity and cultural vitality may not be an automatic one, but the two phenomena frequently do seem to sustain each other. For both the city and the colonies, the effects of Glasgow's American trade transcended purely material factors. Scotland imported tobacco, but its exports included news, letters, books, politics, religion, ideas. The trading link made an interweaving of Scottish and American culture almost inevitable, with consequences that are still being explored by scholars.⁸ Moreover, Glasgow's role as a commercial entrepôt, processing and warehousing tobacco, sugar and other New World products for resale throughout the British Isles and Europe, encouraged still broader cultural contacts and influences.

Glasgow's commercial prosperity also provided opportunities for the development of notions of enlightened progress and improvement, in all aspects of the polite civic culture of an increasingly civilized modern world. Progress could be seen in economic life, stimulating the

dissemination of new, progressive ideas. Yet the process also worked in the reverse direction, as enlightened intellectual values provided a stimulus to economic success. It is entirely possible to see in the Glasgow merchant community a demonstration of the view that enlightened values in education could and should have a practical application. In Philadelphia, that centre of Enlightenment in America, Benjamin Franklin had asked the question: 'What signifies Philosophy that does not apply to some Use?'⁹ The professors of Enlightenment Glasgow would certainly have understood the force of the question, and to a degree they provided an appropriate answer. No fewer than 36 of the 166 tobacco merchants identified in Glasgow between 1740 and 1790 had matriculated at Glasgow University, and there is evidence that many other merchants attended university classes without matriculating.¹⁰

Few merchants were members of the Glasgow Literary Society, or the more convivial Friday and Anderston Clubs, which were dominated by professors from the university. But Glasgow's merchant community was involved in other clubs and societies with loose links to the Enlightenment. As early as the 1740s some merchants were active in a political economy club. At least twenty-five Glasgow merchants were members of the Hodge Podge Club, which was founded in the early 1750s as a literary society, even though its activities soon became strictly social. After the outbreak of the American Revolution, local businessmen founded the Morning and Evening Club, meeting in a tavern in the merchant city; members assembled before breakfast to read the latest newspapers from Edinburgh and London and discuss the American war and the affairs of Parliament. Other clubs, such as the Glasgow branch of the Cape Club and My Lord Ross's Club, combined conviviality with some literary conversation.¹¹ It would

seem, then, that Glasgow's mercantile community was reasonably well educated and engaged in enlightened club life.

Throughout the century, foreign visitors to Glasgow continued to register their delight that such a bustling, prosperous city, one dedicated so largely to merchant enterprise, was also so attractive in its layout and appearance. The description that the English traveller Henry Penruddocke Wyndham sent to his father on 19 July 1758 is typical, differing from Defoe's earlier account only in detail and degree:

Glasgow ... is a large, handsome, & populous city. The Streets are strait, very broad & long; the houses are lofty & uniform and well built with good stone. I never saw in any Town in England, four such fine & elegant streets as run immediately from the Market place to the Four Points. The lower stories near the Market place are supported with handsome Piazzas in the manner of Covent Garden. The public Edifices are very handsome such as the Guild hall, & several good Hospitalls. There are nine Parishes in this city besides an English Chapell, & the inhabitants of the Town are computed to be 50,000. A vast deal of Trade is carried on here, & the streets are as much crowded by Passengers as they are about Charing Cross in London.

In his next letter home, dated 25 July 1758, Wyndham, an Oxford man himself, picked up the same theme, contending that neither 'the high street of Oxford nor any one in London is so good, as the great street in Glasgow.'¹²

The impressions of Glasgow registered by some of the fictional English travellers in Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771) are not unlike the views of Wyndham and other actual English visitors. Although scholars have repeatedly cited Matthew Bramble's characterization of Edinburgh as 'a hot-bed of genius', few have quoted his glowing description of Glasgow:

I am so far happy as to have seen Glasgow, which, to the best of my recollection and judgment, is one of the prettiest towns in Europe; and, without all doubt, it is one of the most flourishing in Great Britain. In short, it is a perfect bee-hive in point of industry. ... The number of inhabitants is said

to amount to thirty thousand; and marks of opulence and independency appear in every quarter of this commercial city.

After pointing out the beauty of the streets and houses, the cathedral, the Cross, and the college, as well as two of the town's 'defects' (the poor quality of the water and the shallowness of the River Clyde), Bramble launches a discussion of some of Glasgow's foremost citizens — the medical men John Moore and John Gordon, and the merchants Andrew Cochran and John Glassford — by observing that 'the people of Glasgow have a noble spirit of enterprise'. Bramble's nephew Jerry Melford is equally enthusiastic, praising not only Glasgow's 'trade and opulence' but also its 'gaiety and diversions'. 'Glasgow is the pride of Scotland,' Jerry declares, 'and, indeed, it might very well pass for an elegant and flourishing city in any part of Christendom.'¹³

In 1777 the Glasgow success story was enshrined in a historical account of the town's progress in *The History of Glasgow*, written by John Gibson, a local merchant. 'An extending commerce and increasing manufactures, joined to frugality and industry' had generated wealth, Gibson explained, and wealth in turn had stimulated the growth not only of banking, credit and more ambitious 'schemes of trade and improvement', but also of a wide range of changes in areas well outside the economic sphere: 'a new stile was introduced in building, in living, in dress, and in furniture; the conveniences, the elegances of life began to be studied; wheel-carriages were set up; public places of entertainment were frequented; an assembly-room and a play-house were built by subscription.' What all this amounted to was nothing less than a Glaswegian cultural revolution during the third quarter of the eighteenth century:

It may be confidently asserted, that, since the year 1750, a total change has been effected, not only in Glasgow, but over the whole country around it; the

manners of the people have undergone an alteration greatly for the better; a spirit of industry and activity has been raised, and now pervades every order of men; commerce has been increased, manufactures have been carried on to a considerable extent, and they are still extending; every person is employed, not a beggar is to be seen in the streets, the very children are busy.¹⁴

Because they had greatly improved the inhabitants' 'manner of living' and contributed 'in a very great degree, to health and happiness', these immense changes constituted, in Gibson's opinion, an unmitigated blessing.

Much of what Gibson had to say was accurate. Yet matters are usually more complicated than booster histories would lead us to believe, and the topic at hand is no exception. The year before Gibson's *History of Glasgow* appeared, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* singled out urban merchants for some harsh criticism, not only for their materialistic self-interest but also for their tendency 'to deceive and even to oppress the publick'.¹⁵ It seems likely that Smith formulated his views on these matters on the basis of his experiences with Glasgow merchants, with whom he associated during the 1750s and early 1760s. Other members of the Glasgow academic community were privately still more critical of the town's merchants. Writing in 1787 to his former student, the Englishman Samuel Rose, the Glasgow humanity (Latin) professor and poet William Richardson made fun of the popularity of Robert Burns's poetry among 'the Glasgow Manufacturers & merchants, persons who never read a verse before in their days'. As a student in Glasgow three years earlier, Rose himself had written an angry letter home to England to describe the hostile reception accorded to the staunch Foxite professor John Millar when he attempted to convince the citizens of the town of the inadvisability of sending up a loyal address in support of the younger Pitt's government:

But what can possibly be expected from a parcel of Merchants, whose every Thought turns upon the *one* thing useful? Whose acquaintance with Books is confined to the cash-Book and Ledger? ... To see men, who often cannot write

their own names, who more frequently cannot spell them with propriety, and who sometimes cannot read them after they are written, to see such men in possession of *plums*, it must naturally excite one's Indignation.¹⁶

Rose claimed to have been present when wealthy Glasgow merchants harangued on the advantages of an 'Illiterate Education' over a 'Literary' one.

Rose's depiction of the merchants of Glasgow as so many cultural Philistines is an overdrawn stereotype, but then so is the opposite conception of them as thoroughly enlightened. In reality, the commercial character of Glasgow created both cultural opportunities and hazards for the Enlightenment. In the same way, Rose's suggestion that the self-interest and general ignorance of the Glasgow merchants fuelled a crude variety of political conservatism is at best only one side of the story. Against this view, it could be argued that the percolation of Enlightenment values down into the professional and mercantile middle class lay behind Glasgow's increased political awareness, which historians have traditionally seen as a straightforward product of the American crisis. It goes without saying, of course, that Glasgow would take an intense and continuing interest in the dispute between Britain and the American colonies, and that the town's economic interests would lead the Glasgow merchants as a whole to speak for compromise and reconciliation. Glasgow was flourishing as a result of existing conditions; change could only be for the worse. As a result, up to and even beyond the point when the Revolution began, Glasgow was one of the few places in the United Kingdom where war with America was openly opposed. Only when it became clear that the war would be fought to a finish did Glasgow shift its ground. If a quick British victory would be the best protection for its investments in the colonies, Glasgow would do all in its power to achieve that end.

However, even if Glasgow's initial concern over the dispute between Britain and the American colonies was based chiefly on economic self-interest, the diffusion of Enlightenment values seems to have ensured that the larger political, ideological and philosophical issues involved in the American Revolution would not go unnoticed. Some of the occasional material printed in Glasgow during and immediately after the American War lends credence to this point of view. In 1778 Revd William Thom of nearby Govan, a supporter, like John Witherspoon before him, of the Popular party in the Church of Scotland, was still able to publish his pro-American sermon, *The Revolt of the Ten Tribes*, originally delivered on 12 December 1776. Still more significant was the publication in Glasgow in 1783 of *A Collection of the Constitutions of the Thirteen United States of North America*, first printed in Philadelphia late in 1780 by order of Congress. The Glasgow edition contains a prefatory set of 'Verses on the Constitutions' that contains the following lines:

But now, behold, a set of new-born states
(Their western shores the vast Atlantic beats)
Whose constitutions have no other plan,
Nor aim than this — the happiness of man.

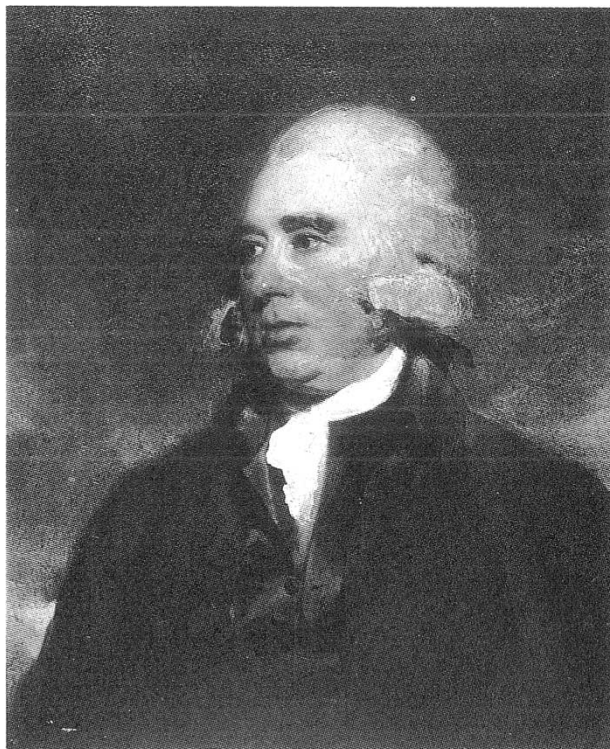
The echo of the Declaration of Independence is clear, but the basic error in geography suggests that the writer was more familiar with American ideals than with the physical reality of the United States.

The poet goes on to ask of the newly-created nation, 'Whence they their institutions drew?' — and proceeds to attempt an answer:

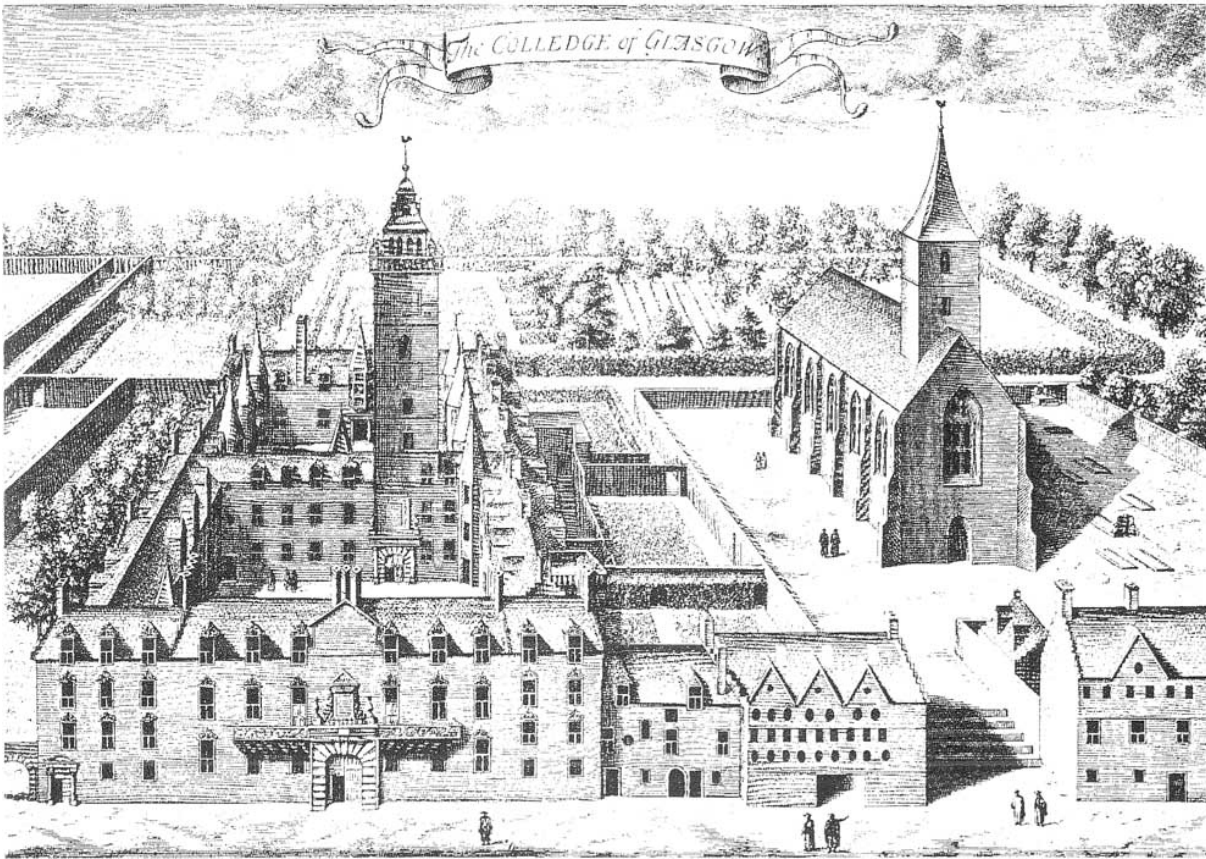
Perhaps their wisdom's borrowed from the store
Of civil policy in ancient lore;
From Him who knew to form a warlike race;
Or Solon who excell'd in arts of peace:
Perhaps they've culled from states of modern days
Whate'er was best and most deserving praise:



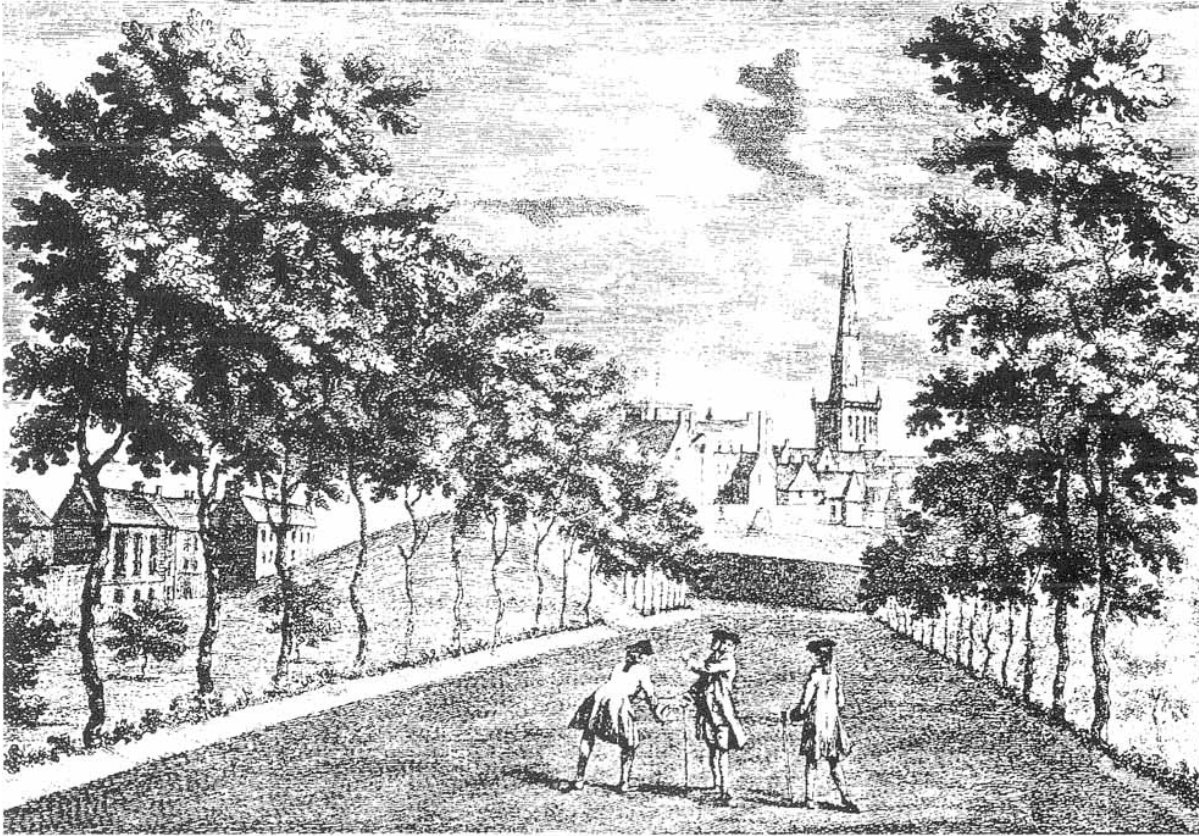
11. James Boswell (1740-1795), biographer of Samuel Johnson, came under the influence of Adam Smith during his attendance at Glasgow University in 1759-60,



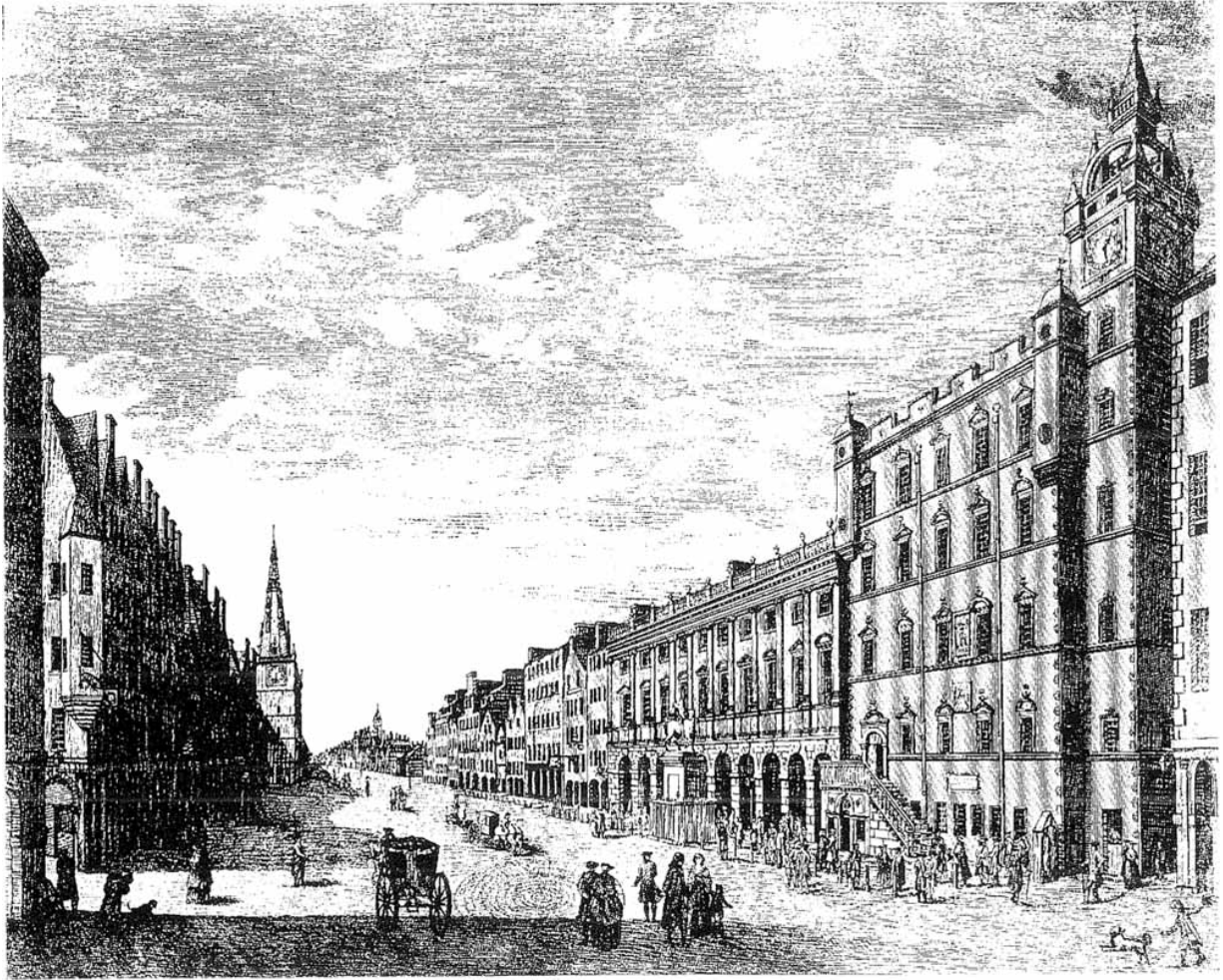
12. Following a medical career in Glasgow in the 1740s and '50s, John Moore (1729-1802) achieved fame as a novelist and travel-writer in London.



13. John Slezer's view of Glasgow College towards the end of the seventeenth century contrasts its urban entrance in the High Street (foreground) with its pastoral surroundings.



14. Robert Paul's view of the Middle Walk in Glasgow College garden was a product of the short-lived Glasgow Academy of Fine Arts (1753-1776) established by the booksellers Robert and Andrew Foulis.



15. The elegant Trongate, as pictured here by Robert Paul, greatly impressed visitors to Glasgow during the eighteenth century.