

Scholars and Literati at the Philosophical Society & Royal Society of Edinburgh (1731-1800)

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This note summarizes our research into the group of scholars and literati who were at the Philosophical Society and at the Royal Society of Edinburgh from its early meetings to 1800.

1 SOURCES

We primarily used two sources for this note. The first one is entitled “Biographical Index of Former Fellows of the Royal Society of Edinburgh 1783 – 2002” and was created by Dr Charles Waterston in collaboration with Angus Shearer. It provides a complete list of the fellows, with their status, either ordinary member or honorary member (we considered the latter as corresponding members). The second one is entitled “The Philosophical Society of Edinburgh 1748 – 1768,” written by Roger L. Emerson and published in the *British Journal for the History of Science*. Emerson organized his list of members by separating them into different categories. First, there are the noblemen, who include the earls and barons. Then there are the baronets and knights. Most people in the first two categories were honorary members (in the sense that they were not scholars), and there were often politicians or advocates. After them, we find the ordinary members, whom Emerson calls “gentlemen.” Finally, we have the foreign and corresponding members, including famous people such as Voltaire or Pieter Camper.

2 THE SOCIETY

The story begins with the highly prestigious Society for the Improvement of Medical Knowledge, co-founded by Colin Maclaurin. In 1737, he wanted to create a broader society and thus founded the Royal Medical Society. To fit the new goal, the name was changed a year later to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society. With the help of professors from the University of Edinburgh, the society became the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1783. The first volume of its new journal, “*Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*,” was published in 1788.

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics. Overall, we link 430 scholars to the Society of Edinburgh. We observe the years and places of birth for about three fourth of them. The average age at first appointment was around 43.1 years, which is relatively old compared to other academies. Longevity is 70.1 years.

The median distance between places of birth and activity is low, at 61km. The coverage of scholars is high in both Wikipedia and Worldcat, where 65.1% of them appear. Hence, most of the scholars did publish some work.

4 FIELDS

Figure 1 shows the balance between the different fields featured at the Society of Edinburgh. It was clearly a scientific academy, with science and medicine being quite well represented. There are some

Period	nb. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with Worldcat
1747-1793	430	81.9%	74%	43.1	70.1	61	64%	65.1%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

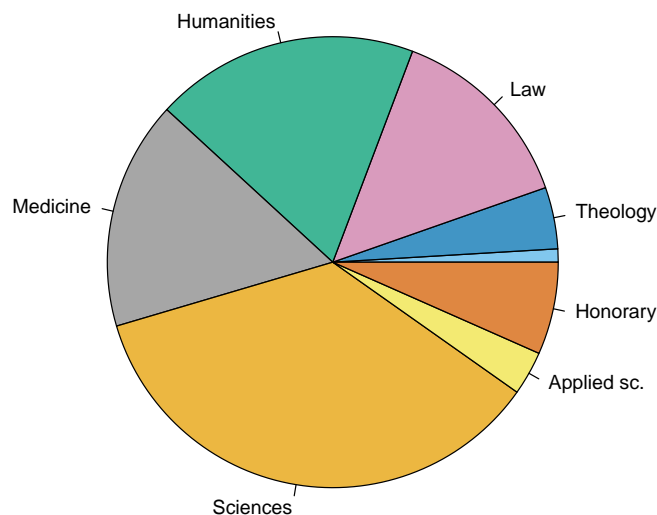


Figure 1: Broad fields at the Society of Edinburgh (published scholars only)

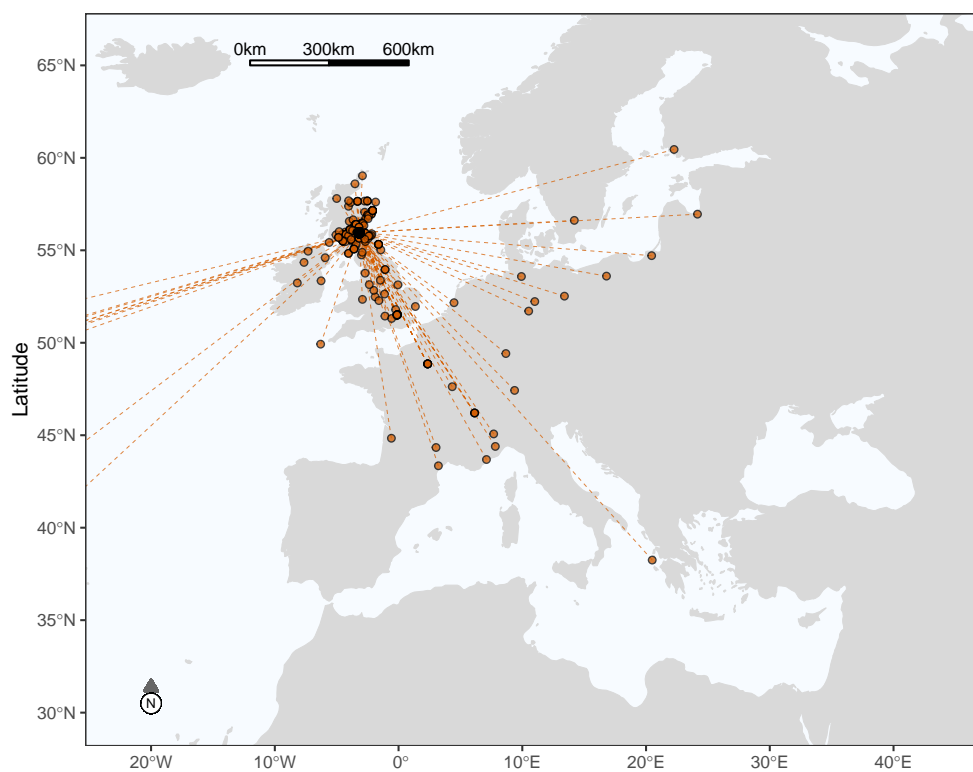


Figure 2: Places of birth of the ordinary members of the Society of Edinburgh

“honorary” members, people who were not scholars, but were either protectors of the academy, or simply interested bourgeois.

5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces of the ordinary members active at the Society of Edinburgh. Its members were born in Scotland, England, Ireland, Northern Europe, France, and in America. None originated from Spain or Italy.

6 HUMAN CAPITAL OF SCHOLARS AND LITERATI

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index, identified by combining information from Worldcat and Wikipedia using principal component analysis. Figure 3 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index at the Society of Edinburgh.

7 TOP 5 SCHOLARS

Thomas Jefferson (Shadwell 1743 – Charlottesville 1826) was an American statesman, diplomat, lawyer, architect, philosopher, and a Founding Father, best known as the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of the United States, serving for eight years. Prior to becoming president, he also served as the first secretary of state under George Washington and the second vice-president under John Adams. Jefferson began his education at Tuckahoe Plantation and an English school at the age of five, then at a local school at nine, where he developed a love for the natural world and began learning Latin, Greek, and French. From 1758 to 1760, he studied history and science under the tutelage of Reverend James Maury, and went on to study mathematics, metaphysics, philosophy, and law at the College of William & Mary, where he was admitted to the Virginia bar in 1767. Jefferson was particularly interested in cases involving slaves and pursued reforms to slavery, even taking on seven cases for freedom-seeking slaves. He also founded the University of Virginia in 1819 and was an ordinary fellow at the Society of Edinburgh, where he was elected in 1789. Throughout his life, Jefferson had a passion for books and created three libraries.

David Hume (Edinburgh 1711 – Edinburgh 1776) was a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, historian, economist, librarian, and essayist. He is most famous for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism. Hume enrolled at the University of Edinburgh at an unusually young age, either 12 or possibly even 10, although his family had hoped he would study law. Instead, he pursued philosophy, and he did not have a high opinion of his professors, claiming that “there is nothing to be learnt from a Professor, which is not to be met with in Books.” Hume did not graduate but spent at least ten years studying and writing about a theory of moral sense. He wrote numerous philosophical papers, including “A Treatise of Human Nature” and “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,” as well as historical papers such as “The History of England” and “Essays, Moral, Political and Literary.” Hume joined the Society of Edinburgh in around 1750 and also served as its secretary.

Adam Smith (Kirkcaldy 1723 – Edinburgh 1790) was a Scottish economist and philosopher who is widely regarded as one of the most influential economists in history. He authored several groundbreaking books, including “The Theory of Moral Sentiments” and “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.” At the age of 14, Smith enrolled at the University of Glasgow, where he pursued studies in moral philosophy. During this time, he developed a keen interest in various philosophical ideas, including reason, civil liberties, and free speech. He was later chosen to pursue postgraduate studies at Balliol College at Oxford, but did not enjoy his time there, as he found the professors to be inferior to those at Glasgow. In fact, he left the university before finishing his degree.

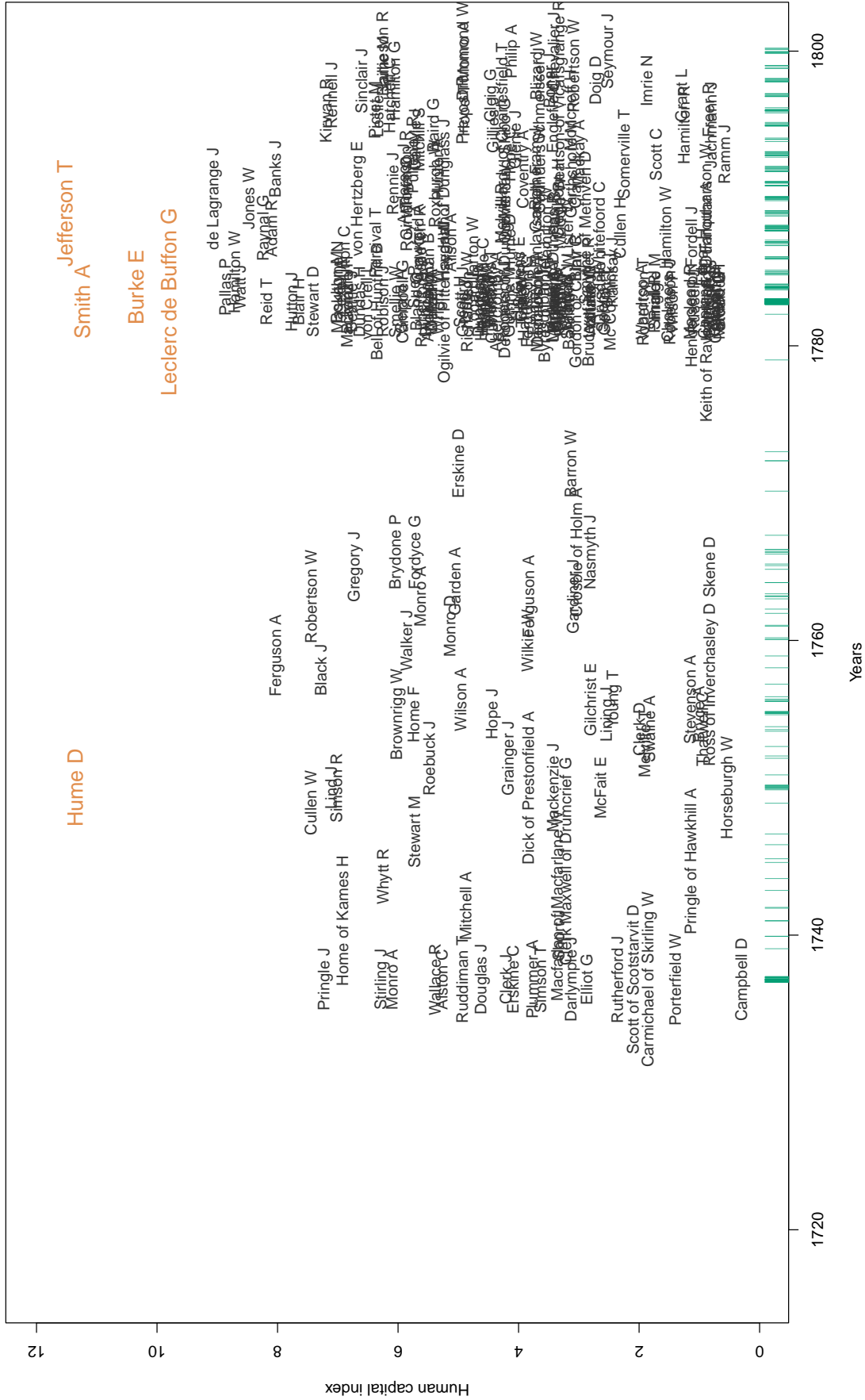


Figure 3: Famous scholars at the Society of Edinburgh

In 1748, Smith began giving public lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres at the University of Edinburgh, where he first formulated the concept of natural liberty. In 1751, he was appointed to a professorship at the University of Glasgow, and in 1752, he was elected to the Edinburgh Society.

Edmund Burke (Dublin 1729 – Beaconsfield 1797) was an Anglo-Irish statesman, economist, and philosopher. He served as a Member of Parliament in the House of Commons from 1766 to 1794. He started his education at a Quaker school in Baltimore. In 1744, he entered Trinity College Dublin and graduated 4 years later. During his time there, he started a debating society which later merged with another one to create the College Historical Society. As his father wanted him to study law, he went to the Middle Temple in London but left quite quickly to travel across Continental Europe. Then, he spent his life writing. He believed in the importance of religious institutions for the moral stability of the state and explained his opinions in his book *A Vindication of Natural Society*. He also criticized the British government for what they did in the American colonies. He supported the colonists in their resistance against authority from London, while he did not support independence. He criticized revolution saying that it destroyed traditional institutions and society. During the 20th century, especially in the United States, he came to be regarded as the philosophical founder of conservatism. He was elected to the Society of Edinburgh on June 28, 1784.

Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (Montbard 1707 – Paris 1788) was a French naturalist, mathematician, and cosmologist. He joined a Jesuit college in Dijon when he was 10. He then studied law, and eventually left Dijon to study mathematics and medicine at the University of Angers. He traveled with the Duke of Kingston (whom he met in 1730) across the south of France and Italy. He bought the village of Buffon with his inheritance. He later went to Paris to study science and increase his fortune. He wrote the famous book *Histoire Naturelle* which included his theory of the “degeneration” of species. He believed that all living things came from a common ancestor and that environmental factors could cause changes in species over time. He also made significant contributions to geology and paleontology. He was elected to the Society of Edinburgh in 1783.

8 RELATED SCHOLARS

In addition to the ordinary members, several individuals were linked to the Society of Edinburgh through a foreign or corresponding membership status. The two scholars shown here belong to this category. These scholars are included in the calculations for all figures but Figure 3.

Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau (Paris 1700 – Paris 1782) was a French physicist, botanist, and agronomist. He was educated by his uncle, who played a crucial role in his upbringing and his brother's. While he did not enjoy many school subjects, he had a passion for physics as it allowed him to indulge in tangible, manual work. Throughout his life, he conducted various experiments and explored different fields such as salts, trees, fishing, and agriculture. Additionally, he had an interest in the navy and even authored a book on naval architecture. He achieved significant recognition during his career, becoming a member of the Académie des Sciences in the botany class and was even elected president of that institution three times. He is widely regarded as one of the most important agronomists of the 18th century. He joined the Society of Edinburgh as an associate member in approximately 1755.

Petrus Camper (Leiden 1722 – The Hague 1789) was a Dutch physician, anatomist, physiologist, midwife, zoologist, anthropologist, palaeontologist, and naturalist. He was one of the pioneers in defining “anthropology” as a distinct field separate from natural history. He was popular in Europe and was a member of various academies including the Royal Society, the Göttingen Academy, the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the

French Academy, and the Prussian Academy of Sciences. He designed surgical tools, studied a variety of animal species, such as the orangutan, the Javan rhinoceros, and the mosasaur. Camper taught philosophy, anatomy, surgery, and botany at universities, including those of Franeker and Groningen. He was also involved in politics, promoting public health issues such as vaccination against smallpox. He joined the Society of Edinburgh around 1762.



Figure 4: Intersections of the lists of scholars between the University and the Society of Edinburgh

9 INTERSECTIONS WITH NEARBY UNIVERSITIES

Figure 4 shows that some members of the society were also professors at the University of Edinburgh, which was created in 1582. The main source for the University of Edinburgh is by Grant (1884), which is quite comprehensive. From the point of view of the society, 15% of its members also taught at the university. From the point of view of the university, a majority of its professors were also society members. This shows a tight link at the local level between the two institutions.

10 ANECDOTES

Because of its northern location, the astronomers could not make valuable long-term observations of planets as opposed to their counterparts in other regions. They were able to observe some solar and lunar events and track new comets, but these observations were limited due to the absence of a proper observatory and also due to the fact that most astronomers there were amateurs with limited expertise.

11 FINAL THOUGHTS

The Society of Edinburgh combined some of the greatest Enlightenment philosophers with scholars working in science and medicine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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