

The Scottish Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement

The Scottish Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that ranged across the fields of philosophy, chemistry, geology, architecture, poetry, engineering, technology, sociology, medicine and history. It was part of a wider European movement which reached its height in this country between 1750 and 1800.

During the Reformation, Scotland was a poor country, with a new Church that was very strict, lacking in cultural awareness, and known for a lack of tolerance. Witch hunts and other persecutions sprouted fear amongst ordinary people.

But as time moved on, the Church settled, and put in place its grand plan to ensure that every individual could read and explore the Bible for themselves. Soon there was a school in every parish, and a huge respect for learning. Education was not compulsory, and cost money, yet almost all children enjoyed three to five years of continuous schooling. As the Jacobite era came to an end, and with stability since the Union, Scottish intellectuals could focus on their passions without having to take political sides. Discussion became very social.

From the 1760s onwards, the Enlightenment was centred on the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen. Groups of thinkers met to eat, drink and debate. Key figures were David Hume, James Hutton, Joseph Black and Adam Smith, to name but a few. Soon Scotland was seen as a most distinguished nation.

'Of all the small nations of this earth, perhaps only the ancient Greeks surpass the Scots in their contribution to mankind!'

Sir Winston Churchill

Romanticism

This was an artistic, literary and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century. It was at its peak between 1800 and 1850. This movement was particularly influential in visual arts, music and literature.

Some of the main characteristics of Romantic literature include a focus on the writer or narrator's emotions and inner world; celebration of nature, beauty, and imagination; rejection of industrialization, organized religion, rationalism, and social convention; idealization of women, children, and rural life; inclusion of supernatural or mythological elements; interest in the past; frequent use of personification; experimental use of language and verse forms, including blank verse; and emphasis on individual experience of the 'sublime'.



David Hume was one of the key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment.

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James MacPherson was the author of the Ossian works.



Sir Walter Scott's home of Abbotsford House was built in the Scottish Baronial style.

Romanticism revived Medievalism, with a strong belief in the importance of nature. It emphasised particularly the effect of nature on the artist when surrounded by it in isolation. Early Romanticism flowered during a period of war – the French Revolution of 1789-1799 and the Napoleonic Wars from 1795-1895. Romantic literature of the mid-18th century includes Thomas Chatterton, the first English Romantic poet.

In the late 1750s the Scottish schoolmaster James Macpherson began travelling in the Highlands and Islands to collect Gaelic Manuscripts and oral accounts of traditional Celtic literature. The result was a collection of 'translations' of ancient texts, which he published in 1760. This included a 'translation' of an epic poem by a semi-legendary poet called Oisín, supposed son of the Celtic warrior hero Finn McCool. These became Ossian, and Fingal, published as an Ancient Poem.

This so-called original lost work was rapturously received as a Romantic epic poem from the Middle Ages. The poem was later proved to be James MacPherson's own work, with a few snippets of ancient ballads inserted. But the Celtic world of the poem spoke to those with a longing for something more mysterious than the rational thought of the Enlightenment. These included the German poet, Goethe, and our own Sir Walter Scott.

Key figures of the Romantic Movement include Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, Shelley, and an older member, William Black. These poets were immortalised in a 1798 publication, *Lyrical Ballads*.

Artists of the period include Constable, though he is more known as a landscape artist, Turner, and Alexander Nasmyth. Art and music was heavily influenced by Ossian, and by Burns together with the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott.

There was also a Gothic Revival in architecture from the 1740s onwards, with many church or public buildings being built in the Medieval Gothic style. Sir Walter Scott's rebuilding of Abbotsford House also sparked a revival of the Scottish Baronial style of architecture.

Further Reading

The Scottish Enlightenment: An Anthology.
Edited by Alexander Broadie, Edinburgh, 1998

The High Road: Romantic Tourism, Scotland and Literature 1720-1780 John Glendening, MacMillan 1996

The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism,
Murray Pittock, Edinburgh University Press 1991

Introducing Romanticism, Duncan Heath and Judy Boreham,
Icon books 2005

Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries, Martin Butler,
Oxford 1881

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