

**PART II**

**CHIEFLY THEORETICAL: LINES OF  
KAMES'S THINKING AND HIS  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WORLD OF IDEAS**

## INTRODUCTION: WIDENING HORIZONS AND THE SECULARIZATION OF THE SCOTTISH MIND

In the general introduction to this study and elsewhere, particularly in Chapter IV, attention has been called to the remarkable phenomenon that has often been called the “Scottish Awakening.” The upsurge of economic improvements of various kinds in town and country, the overcoming of many of the political handicaps of the past, the awakening of a new scientific curiosity, the rise of a new spirit in the universities, and finally, a new upsurge in letters, both what were called *belles lettres* and more philosophical and historical productions – all of these were little short of phenomenal.

It is with the latter of these in particular – the new currents of intellectual, and to some extent also artistic life – in mind, or what may be called the “Scottish Enlightenment” of the middle and latter part of the eighteenth century, that we are bold to assert that this movement of thought and culture will bear fair comparison, as already briefly noted, with only such great historical movements as the Age of Pericles in Greece, the Augustan Age in Rome, the Italian Renaissance, the scientific and literary movement in England in the seventeenth century, the contemporary movement in France centering about the Encyclopedists, and the historical and philosophical movement in Germany centering about the founding of the University of Berlin. If this Scottish movement lacked the dimensions of some of these other movements, in its qualitative aspects and in its seminal character it bears favorable comparison indeed with them.

By “seminal” we mean in particular the manner in which the philosophical speculations of a Hume, for example, aroused, by his own confession, the great Immanuel Kant from his philosophical slumbers, or in which Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, for all its lack of formal organization of the subject, almost literally gave rise to a new science of economics – so much so that when the distinguished French economist Say, on a visit to Glasgow a generation later, was allowed to sit in the very chair

once occupied by this Scottish economist, he could not refrain from breaking out in a *nunc demittis!* Now I am ready to die that I have touched this object made sacred by its great one-time occupant.<sup>1</sup> Similarly with the discoveries of “latent heat” and of carbon dioxide by Joseph Black, and of nitrogen by Rutherford, that literally gave rise to the new sciences of physics and chemistry, and the work of Hutton that really laid the foundations of modern geology.

If this strikes the reader on first thought as a somewhat exaggerated appraisal of this intellectual and artistic movement, let us listen to an evaluation of it by such eminent recent Scottish historians as P. Hume Brown and William Law Mathieson. Of the leaders of this movement Professor Brown observes,

[They are] epoch-making in their respective subjects; but, as Voltaire’s ironical words [on the Scottish literary movement] imply, many books were written, which, though they did not attain to this distinction, yet exercised a wide influence in their day. What specially strikes us is the number of Scottish books of the period that were translated into the continental languages. The works of Lord Kames, the *Sermons* of Hugh Blair, Beattie’s *Essay on Truth*, [and he might have named many others] all made the tour of Europe – significant evidence of the amount of truth that lay behind Voltaire’s sarcasm.

If Scotsmen were initiators in literature and philosophy, they were equally pioneers in the field of physical science. The names of Cullen and John Hunter in pathology, of Black . . . and Leslie in chemistry, of Hutton in Geology, and of Watt in engineering, are landmarks in the history of these respective departments. In view of her various achievements in so many fields, therefore, it can hardly be gainsaid that the latter half of the eighteenth century was for Scotland “the period of her most energetic, peculiar and most various life.”<sup>2</sup>

And quoting further the words of Professor Masson, Brown continues, “It is certainly the period, when, by the testimony of foreign observers, she made her largest contribution to the world alike in the sphere of speculative and practical ideas.”<sup>3</sup>

Professor Brown also reminds us that “When the Newtonian system was still rejected in Oxford and Cambridge, it was taught by David Gregory in the University of Edinburgh – a remarkable testimony to the openness of mind which was indeed the characteristic of the best Scottish intellects of the time.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> P. Hume Brown, *Surveys of Scottish History* (Glasgow, 1919), pp. 106ff. Voltaire’s ironical remarks here referred to are those previously cited in connection with Kames’s *Elements of Criticism*, *supra*, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

From a slightly different angle, Mathieson similarly observes in his *Awakening of Scotland*:

. . . The latter half of the eighteenth century, which witnessed an immense advance in the material condition of Scotland, was also . . . the most brilliant epoch in the history of her literature and science. Nowhere but in France was there so rich and varied an efflorescence of genius. The England of that day produced no such philosopher as Hume; no such opponent of his skepticism as Campbell; no such historians – to adopt the contemporary verdict – as Hume and Robertson; no such tragic dramatist as Home; no poet of such European reputation as Macpherson; no such novelist as Smollett; no such biographer as Boswell; no such preacher as Blair; no such economist as Adam Smith; no such geologist as Hutton; no such surgeon as Hunter; no such physician as Cullen; no such chemist as Black; no such engineer as Watt; and it was within this period that Robert Burns, the finest and fullest embodiment of his country's genius, lived and died . . .<sup>5</sup>

It is to this intellectual awakening, and of course in particular to Kames's relation thereto, that we address ourselves in the chapters that follow. And it should be said at once that this Scottish Enlightenment differed in a number of ways, that we are not entering into at this point, from the French or the European Enlightenment generally.

How far this movement was influenced from abroad, particularly from France, towards which country the Scots were more sympathetic and with which in some ways they had even closer contacts than with the English themselves, is a fair question and one on which much might be said both pro and con – obviously this was a two way street – but one into which we shall, again, not enter here. How far it was influenced by economic factors, and these in turn by the new political alignment resulting from the Act of Union in the beginning of the century, is a question of perhaps even greater importance and one which we shall touch upon briefly elsewhere. Obviously we cannot ignore an element of sheer genius and personal leadership, however they may have been aroused or however we may attempt to explain their presence at this time. Because genius and creativity there certainly were that cannot be explained by reference merely to outward circumstances and pressures alone. In any event, the phenomenon was there; it was very real, and it affected almost every department of life.

Without entering at this point into the peculiarities of the philosophical thinking that underlay other aspects of this thought movement, we can perhaps best describe the thoughtful mind of the time as characterized by widening horizons and by a secularization of interests and of thinking. By

<sup>5</sup> Mathieson, *Awakening of Scotland*, pp. 203f.

“widening horizons” we mean not only that new means of communication and new pressures were breaking down geographic barriers, so that, for example, an increasing number of scholars were attending universities abroad – as only a few had previously done – and a goodly number of soldiers of fortune were seeking service in the armies of monarchs abroad. Even more important was the marked increase of population mobility, from country to city, from Highlands and Islands to Lowlands and from the homeland to the colonies across the seas, and with this the new flow of ideas from places little known before. And finally, through the literature of travel and exploration, so highly popular at this time, people had an entirely new world opened up to them. Abundant reports on new ways of life, customs, religious beliefs and modes of worship and social values of various kinds came from this source, that stood in strange contrast to the home culture and the biblical lore that had so largely made up Scottish life and thought up to this time.

By “secularization” we mean not at all irreligion or a denial of religious values – of this there is little evidence here – or in a moral sense a “worldly” attitude – of this there may indeed have been some – and certainly not an opposition to everything associated with the church, the kind of thing that led a Voltaire in France to exclaim “*écrasez l’infame!*” For of this we find nothing, or almost nothing, here. Rather by the secularization of the mind we mean first of all the bringing of mundane interests into a new focus in relation to religious interests; and of such mundane interests, economic, political, and philosophical, there were many more to engross the mind than heretofore. And along with this there went a feeling that many things formerly considered “sinful” or “worldly” were simply among the facts of life that had at any rate to be reckoned with, however religion might have thought of them before, and a feeling also that life might even be enriched by bringing religious thought and practice and these mundane things into a new relationship one with the other. For these new values were not necessarily in conflict with religious values but constituted a challenge, rather, to make religious values themselves more meaningful in the here and now.

Secularization means, however, also a breaking of the power and authority of the traditional for tradition’s sake. Such a new attitude toward the merely traditional came almost of necessity with the entrance of many new things, new inventions, contacts, comforts, etc. into men’s lives, which accompanied the movement from rural isolation to towns and cities. Here men had to make choices of friends and companions, of occupations and even of church affiliations, that they did not have to make before. With

secularization in this sense, "authority" tended strongly to give way to "utility."

And with such secularization there went also new ways of thinking. Questions in regard to the nature and destiny of the human soul were giving way to questions as to the nature of human nature itself, of what constitutes the good life, and of how peace among men can be achieved, poverty and needless suffering be relieved or at least mitigated, and life in the here and now be made richer. Questions of morality were coming increasingly to be answered by appeal to human needs and to the social consequences of men's actions rather than merely by appeal to scripture texts. To questions regarding the nature and origin of the world about them, answers were coming to be sought in observation, physical experiments and historical inquiry, rather than by appeal to the Genesis account of creation, though a belief in the historicity of the biblical narrative, or at least a lip service to such belief, gave way but very slowly.

To this we might add, in another area of concern, that while religiously men might continue to enjoy the hymns and Psalms and prayers of old, they were also coming to sing new songs and to enjoy new forms of literary expression, be it *The Gentle Shepherd*, the plaints of Lorna, the songs of Cuchilla and the heroic exploits of Fingal, or the beautiful "periods" of Robertson's prose, or a little later the outpourings of the plowman poet. And they were asking questions, even about the most familiar things, that they had not asked before.

On this matter of secularization we quote Professor Brown again when he observes,

There is one outstanding characteristic which sharply distinguishes the eighteenth century in Scotland from the century and a half that preceded it. It was the predominance of secular over religious and ecclesiastic interests . . . The weightiest reason that influenced Scottish statesmen who invoked the Union [1707] was that Scotland would become a partner in English trade and would thus find herself on the high road to commercial greatness and prosperity.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, though we do not today see this secularization of the human mind as necessarily in conflict with religious values, we dare not for a moment forget that the Scottish mind of that day was deeply infused with Calvinistic doctrines and puritanical values; and this Calvinistic mind, while not indeed chiefly an other-worldly mind, was to a large extent a theological mind. This theological and theologically argumentative mind

<sup>6</sup> Brown, *Surveys*, pp. 106f.

that prevailed in Scotland would not give way easily to this historically widening and secularizing tendency, and an element of conflict, therefore, inevitably remained, as we shall more than once have occasion to note. It should be observed here, however, that this theological mind and this theological argumentativeness was much less a matter of dogmatism than it was an attempt to give a rational account of a religious faith; and such a faith was a vital element in the life of the Scottish people. This same kind of rationality, moreover, was applied to every other domain of life and gave a peculiar character to the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

And now, finally, to the purpose of all this, Kames's work in a number of these fields is intimately related to this entire thought movement – at once in taking his cues from the creative minds and the new ideas that were stirring here at this time, in the stimulation he himself gave to the men, often more creative than himself, who were together building this new world of ideas and culture, and in original contributions he was making, especially in such fields as law and literary criticism.

As Kames himself viewed this scene,

The progress of art [whether useful or fine] seldom fails to be rapid when a people happen to be roused out of a torpid state by some fortunate change of circumstances: prosperity contrasted with former abasement, gives to the mind a spring which is vigourously exerted in every new pursuit.

After citing a chain of events of a political nature, some fortunate and some unfortunate, he continues,

Enmity [between England and Scotland] wore away gradually and the eyes of the Scots were opened to the advantages of their present condition: the national spirit was roused to emulate and to excel: talents were exerted, hitherto latent; and Scotland at present makes a figure in arts and sciences, above what it ever made while an independent kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

In the chapters that follow we shall attempt to give an account of Kames's thinking, first in the broader field of what we call his "common sense philosophy," or his view of man, society and culture generally, and with special emphasis upon his historical and institutional approach to the problems under review; then of his general philosophy of law and jurisprudence; this to be followed by his critical theory or his aesthetic philosophy, especially as applied to literature, and by his ideas on education and the status and education of women. A chapter on his political and

<sup>7</sup> *Sketches*, I, 186 and 189f.

economic theory is followed by a final chapter but one on what might be called his general philosophy of religion and the religious tenets that were most meaningful to him. Finally in a summary chapter, an attempt is made to evaluate his overall contributions to the history of ideas.