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# Introduction: Globalising the Reception of Scottish Enlightenment Philosophy

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**Abstract**

*The reception of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy is usually told as a story of diffusion, with ideas carried outward from Scotland intact. The eight articles of this special issue, which grew out of a conference in Tokyo in 2025, start from a different premise. They treat reception as the place where philosophical meaning took shape, as arguments were adapted, narrowed and at times displaced in new settings. The issue follows Adam Smith's reworking of Newton and Hume and the historical writing of Hume, his Jacobite critics and Edmund Burke. It then traces Richard Price's exchanges with Scots, Christian Garve's German reading of Smith, the politics of debate in 1790s Edinburgh and James Mill's rewriting of Smith. Together they show that Scottish Enlightenment philosophy was remade in the act of being received.*

The reception of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy is often described as diffusion, a movement of ideas outward from Scotland into wider British, European and imperial contexts. Serviceable as it is, this framing obscures as much as it reveals. It presumes a coherence in the originating body of thought, and it casts reception as passive, a matter of transmission rather than transformation. The essays in this special issue proceed from a different premise. Rather than treating reception as the extension of an already-formed doctrine, they approach it as a principal site at which philosophical meaning took shape. Scottish Enlightenment philosophy did not simply travel and arrive intact. In being received, it was remade. Reception itself reconstituted what that philosophy was taken to mean.

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This issue originated in a conference organised by Sora Sato and Brad Bow in Tokyo in the summer of 2025. The setting was not incidental. It provided form to the very phenomenon under examination, the displacement of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy into a new intellectual environment and its reinterpretation there. Rather than assembling conference proceedings in any narrow sense, the essays collected here record that encounter through the sustained elaborations of a shared problem first brought into focus through discussion.

The contributions converge on a single question. What became of Scottish philosophical arguments when they were removed from their original contexts and redeployed within new intellectual, political and institutional settings? What emerged, in each case, was a transformation. Concepts did not pass intact from one setting to the next. Reception adapted them, narrowed them, extended them, and at times displaced them altogether. The tradition appears in these pages less as a stable corpus than as what Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd edn, 2007), called 'an historically extended, socially embodied argument', its contours provisional and continually reconstituted in the act of reception.

A first group of essays attends to the mediating role of intellectual networks and the practices of sociability that sustained them. A reconsideration of Richard Price's engagement with Scottish thinkers offers a point of entry. Conventionally situated within Welsh, English, or Atlantic frameworks, Price emerges here as closely entangled with Scottish interlocutors through correspondence, shared circles and habits of discussion. His exchanges with figures such as Adam Ferguson and David Hume disclose a common argumentative terrain, one in which norms of candour and reciprocity structured disagreement and sustained the expectation that philosophical conflict remained compatible with knowledge exchange. Divergence, in this setting, was itself a form of exchange.

Seen from this vantage, reception cannot be reduced to unilateral transmission. The movement of ideas was inseparable from the forms of association through which they were discussed. Clubs, correspondence and informal encounter shaped their interpretation and delimited their authority. By the time an idea was 'received', it had already been transformed by the conditions of its reception. Scottish philosophy thus appears within a shared discursive space that exceeded national and doctrinal boundaries, and in which meaning was negotiated rather than imposed.

Sociability was a subject of reception as well as its medium. Christian Garve, long regarded as a principal mediator of the Scottish Enlightenment in Germany, took up Smith's analysis of commercial society in *On Sociability and Solitude*, above all his account of the intellectual and moral consequences of the division of labour. He read *The Wealth of Nations* less as a system of political economy than as a penetrating observation of modern society. In his hands the structural problems of civilised society became questions of individual moral cultivation, and his critique remained within the bounds of moral psychology rather than issuing in a programme of political or social reform.

A second group of essays examines how philosophical principles were transformed when carried beyond their original contexts. Smith was himself a discriminating reader of his sources. His appropriation of Newton, often treated as a single 'Newtonian method', in fact divides according to purpose. In 'The History of Astronomy', Newton's physics exemplifies a method of enquiry that joins analysis to synthesis, while in the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* the Newtonian method serves a didactic end and, being synthetic, is methodologically equivalent

to that of Descartes. The rise of Newtonianism, on this reading, transformed the method of enquiry without transforming the method by which its results were communicated. A comparable discrimination marks Smith's reworking of Hume. His critique of Hume in Part IV of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, usually read as a dispute over sympathy and utility, applies a framework drawn from Hume's own epistemology, in which several principles bear upon judgement and one prevails as natural. Smith's objection was that Hume had mistaken which principle that was. Criticism, in this instance, was itself a mode of inheritance.

James Mill's reinterpretation of Smith's political economy carries the analysis into the nineteenth century. Smith's account of commercial society, often reduced to a doctrine of free trade, in fact accommodated a substantial element of prudential judgement, nowhere more clearly than in his qualified defence of the Navigation Acts. Mill's reformulation stripped that element away. What stood in Smith as a conditional exception became, in Mill, a violation of principle.

The significance of the shift lay less in its particular conclusions than in the mode of reasoning it presupposed. Smith proceeded by a continual adjustment between general principles and particular circumstances. Mill abstracted those principles from their conditions of application and recast them as universal laws. In doing so, he converted a prudential liberalism into a systematic one, increasingly aligned with the demands of imperial administration and global commerce. Here, reception operated as conceptual reordering, preserving the authority of the source while transforming the very structure of its argument.

A third group situates reception within its political and institutional conditions. An analysis of the Maconochie affair in the Edinburgh Speculative Society brings into view the pressures bearing upon the Enlightenment practices of debate in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Efforts to restrict discussion and regulate its subject matter registered a broader anxiety about the relation between intellectual exchange and political instability. Institutions that had sustained Enlightenment sociability came, in this moment, to function as sites of surveillance as much as of conversation.

Yet the same institutions furnished the means by which such restrictions were contested. The defence of free inquiry proceeded through the procedural and associational forms of the Society itself. Reception, on this account, was a practical activity embedded in institutional life and shaped by its constraints. Enlightenment intellectual culture survived only through its continual renegotiation within the very structures that sought to curtail it.

Closely related is the historiographical dimension of reception. A comparison of Edmund Burke and David Hume shows that engagement with Scottish Enlightenment thought also proceeded through the reconfiguration of its explanatory frameworks. Their philosophical histories diverged in their accounts of political authority, the development of liberty and the workings of what each called 'the spirit of the age'. The disagreement reached beyond particular judgements to the principles governing historical explanation itself. In this instance, reception transformed method no less than conclusion.

The historiographical dimension also extends inward, to the reception of Scottish philosophical categories within Scotland itself. An account of the Marian Controversy, the long dispute over Mary Stuart's complicity in the murder of her second husband, follows the fortunes of one such category. For Hume, character was an analytic instrument, the point

at which conduct was referred to motive and motive to durable disposition. The *History of England* provided the setting in which principles developed in the philosophical works were brought to bear upon the historical record. In the hands of his Jacobite opponents, the same term did quite different work. Walter Goodall, William Tytler and the apologists who followed them adopted the evidential idiom of enlightened inquiry while treating character as a dynastic inheritance, fixed in advance and secured against circumstance. By the closing decades of the century, the partisan charge had dissipated, and Mary's character passed into the sentimental register that would carry it into the nineteenth century.

What the dispute discloses is a mode of reception conducted under constraint and frequently in private. Much of the Jacobite response survives only in notes, letters and marginalia, among them James Steuart's commentary on Hume, Lord Elibank's threatened vindication and Robert Forbes's annotations to Pennant's *Tour in Scotland*. Avowed Marian sympathy carried a political cost, and the reworking it prompted left few public traces, yet it shaped what appeared in print, not least the concessions Hume made to Mary's virtues in the character sketch that closes his account of her reign. Displacement, on this evidence, need not be geographical. Before Scottish philosophical categories were carried abroad, they were already being contested and remade at home.

Across these contributions a consistent pattern emerges. Reception operated as a form of mediation. Ideas did not pass unchanged between contexts. They were translated, and in translation their meaning was altered. This mediation unfolded on several levels at once, within networks of sociability, in the reinterpretation of doctrine, under conditions of institutional constraint and through the practice of historical writing. In each case, reception entailed both continuity and displacement.

Such a perspective invites a reconsideration of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy itself. Understood in this way, it ceases to appear as a self-contained tradition whose defining features were fixed in advance of its reception. Those features emerged, rather, through the processes by which the tradition was received and reworked. The coherence of Scottish thought was produced, often retrospectively, through acts of interpretation that selected, emphasised and reordered its elements.

The essays gathered here do more than document the dissemination of Scottish Enlightenment ideas. They reconstruct the conditions under which those ideas assumed their various determinate forms. Reception was no external supplement to the tradition. It was one of the tradition's principal modes of existence. On the evidence assembled here, the legacy of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy has persisted only through continual reinterpretation. It is in that ongoing labour, rather than in any fixed origin, that the tradition is most fully itself.