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# The Enlightenment, Towns and Urban Society in Scotland, c.1760–1820

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## Abstract

Based on analysis of a sample of around twenty towns of different size and character, and distributed across the country, this article examines the role and place of enlightenment in the provincial Scottish town during the later Georgian period. In so doing, it questions a series of assumptions commonly

made in recent writing about Georgian towns in Britain about an almost symbiotic relationship between commerce, enlightenment, and politeness. However illuminating it might be for England, such a model has very limited validity for Scottish towns. The bulk of the article, however, investigates how far there was an urban dynamic behind the spread of enlightenment values and culture in Scottish society in this period, how best to conceive of this dynamic, and how powerfully and among whom it operated. Using evidence of lists of subscribers to libraries, private book collections as revealed in inventories of moveable estates compiled at death, and the business records of a provincial bookseller, an attempt is made to map more extensively than hitherto the social and geographical boundaries of enlightenment culture in urban Scotland in this period. A further theme is the growth of what can be termed a popular enlightenment, a development closely linked to the impact of the French Revolution and associated germination of a radical politics among the Scottish labouring classes. The article is thus designed to deepen understanding of a crucial phase in modern Scottish urbanization, but also the reception in British society of enlightenment ideas and values.

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