Research Notes 【研究討論】

Theorising the Problems of Small Nations in the Enlightenment: The Case of Scotland
論析啟蒙時期的小國之道──以蘇格蘭為例

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It was a commonplace of Enlightenment thinking that history should be studied in order to instruct as well as to entertain, and that the history of great events should be set in contexts that would throw light on the manners, morals and beliefs of the actors engaged in them. No group of intellectuals in the eighteenth century was to be more sensitive to this agenda that the historians of the Scottish Enlightenment. David Hume, William Robertson John Millar and their followers developed a philosophical history that was 'philosophical' in the sense of being rooted in the principles of human nature and 'historical' in its sensitivity to the civilisational origins of national institutions and cultures. It was this that led David Hume to exclaim in 1770 that 'this is the historical age and this the historical nation.'[1] It was a historiography that made the Scots particularly sensitive to the European origins and contexts of their own history—Hume's treatment of the history of England and Robertson's treatment of the history of Scotland are particularly noteworthy in this respect, and it ensured that their attitudes to Europe would always retain a distinctively Scottish character.

The period with which this essay is concerned was one in which the public intellectuals of Scotland were acutely aware that their country was at a turning point in its history and that careful reflection on the European contexts of its predicament would be of value in understanding its future. For the period that begins with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and was to end with the Great Reform Act of 1832 was one in which Scotland lost its political independence and was absorbed into the political and fiscal framework of what Colin Kidd has described as an Anglo-British state.[2] This process of absorption began in 1707 with the passing of an Act of Union, took shape as successive British governments deployed the military resources and patronage of the state to crush opposition to the Union and to buy in

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1 David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, edited by John Y. T. Greig, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 230.
2 Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c.1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 1

the support of the landed classes, the merchants and the burghs. It was effectively brought to a conclusion by a remarkable if delayed economic boom and a process of cultural integration that began in earnest in the middle decades of the century and continued to the end of our period. By then, it was generally believed that the union between the two countries was "complete" . The remarkable cultural paradox that lies at the heart of this process of assimilation—and it is, perhaps the central cultural paradox of the British state in this period of commercial and imperial expansion—is that during the middle and later decades of the century Scotland acquired one of the most sophisticated, influential and politically alert intelligentsias to be found in Europe in the period of the later enlightenment.

In this paper I want to consider Scottish attitudes to Europe at two key moments in this period. The first precedes the Act of Union of 1707 and covers a period in which the Scottish political classes were faced with the prospect of a parliamentary union with England that seemed to threaten the political survival of a small, restless and economically troubled nation. The second follows the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, coincides with the first signs of serious economic growth and further coincides with the period of enlightenment when politically alert Scots began to ask whether political stability, economic growth and cultural reputation were an adequate compensation for the loss of political independence. In particular, I want to discuss the thought of two key thinkers who were deeply preoccupied with the present state of Scottish politics. The first of these figures is Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, whose political analysis was of immense importance in shaping the debate about the Act of Union. The second was David Hume, the great philosopher, historian and religious sceptic whose thinking was of foundational importance in shaping the intellectual culture of the Scottish enlightenment and the attitudes of enlightened Scots to the public culture of the new British state. Both were to attempt to clarify urgent Scottish political problems by setting them in wider and distinctively European contexts.

Throughout this period, Scots who chose to think about the state of European politics drew upon a set of assumptions which were more or less common to the language of European political thought. Their Europe was a state system dominated by the great composite monarchies whose rivalries continually provoked the fear that the sub-continent might become a universal monarchy under the rule of Spain, or later, France. These 'enormous monarchies' as David Hume called them, Spain and France in particular, were seen as the creation of ambitious dynasts who had set out to extend their dominions by means of dynastic marriages, political unions and conquest and presented their rulers with the problem of preserving their new, often dangerously heterogenous realms from rebellion, civil war and religious divisions. It was a situation that ensured that much contemporary political analysis and statecraft would be concerned with the problem of constructing political, military and ecclesiastical institutions which could hold political and religious faction in check and create the conditions which would encourage the growth of political stability and international peace. In the hands of great theorists of government and politics like Grotius, Hobbes and Pufendorf, this suggested that absolute monarchy was the only viable mechanism for creating integrated polities. Like seventeenth century France and Spain, Britain was a composite monarchy whose backbone was the Union of the Crowns of 1603, a loose dynastic union between England and Scotland which had left each country with its own church, parliament and systems of government. From the first, it proved to be a notably unstable political union and successive kings found to their cost that Scotland had remained a remote, potentially rebellious country difficult to govern from London. Indeed, the only ruler who had any success in integrating the government of the two countries was Oliver Cromwell, the dominating figure in the government of the country during the republican Interregnum of 1649-1660, and he was only able to do so because he had the resources of the most efficient army in Europe to call on. But Cromwell's experiment in direct rule was hated and never forgotten by Scots and it ensured that Scottish political thinking would always return to the problem of maintaining the independence of a small nation in an increasingly imperial age and to the related

problem of whether it was possible to maintain a peaceful union between two states which was based on the idea of limited monarchy.

What is interesting about this period in Scottish history is that every informed member of the Scottish political elite knew the lessons of European history, that composite monarchies whose rulers lacked well-constructed integrated systems of government and large standing armies were prone to the sort of political instability that had been Scotland's lot for much of the seventeenth century, but they also knew very well that the price of integration in Britain was loss of national independence. At the same time European history taught that it was hard for small nations to survive as independent political entities unless they had viable political institutions or were protected by greater powers. By the later seventeenth century, so far as the smaller nations of contemporary Europe were concerned, the answer seemed to lie in exploiting the resources of international trade and commerce. As the recent history of the Netherlands showed, it was possible for a small nation with a highly developed trading economy to develop as a military and naval power which was capable of holding enormous monarchies like France in check.

In the last two decades of the seventeenth century, the Scots were to study the example of the Netherlands with care. It was a country they knew well and knew at first hand. Many had been exiled there between 1660 and 1688 when their faith had been criminalised by the restored Stuart monarchy. From 1660 to the 1720's its universities provided Scottish gentlemen with a sophisticated and cosmopolitan education. Above all, the Netherlands were known to them through the lucrative trade links that developed with the east coast Scottish ports. The belief that international trade could turn a small and vulnerable state into an independent and possibly a great one was enough to encourage the Scots parliament, and a strikingly large sector of its landed and professional class to invest in the Darien Scheme, a remarkable colonial enterprise, which was conceived in 1695 and was intended to establish a Scottish entrepôt in Panama at the junction of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The project failed, and failed dramatically. The English court and

parliament withdrew their political and diplomatic support, leaving the Scots expeditionary force at the mercy of a hostile Spanish army. The expedition collapsed, with disastrous consequences for the Scottish economy, painfully demonstrating the vulnerability of the Scottish state. It was an experiment that showed that in a militarised and commercialised world small nations would only survive as sovereign states if they possessed the sort of political, military and commercial resources Scotland so conspicuously lacked or if they enjoyed the protection of a great power. One or two Scots speculated longingly on the possibility of uniting their country with the Netherlands but most realised that in an increasingly imperial and militarised Europe their future would depend on a renegotiated union with England which would regularise relations between the two kingdoms and offer Scottish merchants access to English markets at home and overseas. What gave the question political urgency was the death of the heir to the English and Scottish thrones, and the prospect of a disputed succession and civil war. There were powerful political interests in both countries set on negotiating a new Union which would secure the protestant succession and regularise a politically troublesome union. The question Scots now faced, the question Andrew Fletcher was to address with clarity and a sense of urgency, was whether it was possible for a small European state to secure the military and commercial resources needed to secure its independence without paying a political price that would subvert the independence a better regulated Union was intended to preserve. So far as Fletcher was concerned, these were problems that could only be understood and managed through a better understanding of the recent history of the European state system. His achievement was to develop a view of European politics which was to play an important part in shaping the public culture of Scotland during the long eighteenth century.

Fletcher was a wealthy, radical, bad-tempered Scottish country gentleman who knew Europe well as a mercenary and as a political exile. He was also a highly intelligent, formidably learned political analyst. A close and critical reader of

Tacitus, Machiavelli and Harrington, he was interested in classic questions about the relations between power and property, in the origins of the modern state system and in the consequences of the increasingly imperial power of modern monarchies for the smaller nations, republics and provinces of Europe. He entered Scottish politics after the Glorious Revolution and quickly established himself as a radical who was determined to limit the power of the English court over Scottish government. But he was enough of a modernist to be fully aware of the importance of commerce to the politics of modern Europe and to Scotland's future; it is significant that he invested heavily in the Darien Scheme. It is equally significant that, after its collapse, he was to loose no time in looking for new ways to rebuild his country's political institutions and to reconceptualise its relations with England.[3]

Fletcher set out the guiding principles of his thinking in a series of pamphlets written in 1698 after the collapse of the Darien Scheme. His theme was the consequences for modern Europe of the profound shift in the balance of power and property that had taken place throughout Europe with the decline of feudalism. He thought that modern Europe was at a turning point in its history, threatened with the prospect of Universal Monarchy which only the most radical action of patriots like himself could hope to avert. Like David Hume a generation later he thought that confronting this threat in his own country demanded a reappraisal of his country's history in the light of the lessons modern Europe had to offer. He was a harsh critic of the narrow, provincial thinking of those who thought of their nations histories in exceptionalist terms without any regard for the wider European contexts in which their institutions and cultures had developed. Scotland's present condition, like that of every other European state had its roots in a feudal system which had survived for a millennium and was now everywhere in an advanced stage of decline. In a quick, bold and at times elliptical sketch, he portrayed European feudalism as a system of government which had established a balance of power and property

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3 Fletcher's life is conveniently summarised in Andrew Fletcher, *Andrew Fletcher: Political Works,* edited by John Robertson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. ix-xxxiv.

between the kings of medieval Europe and their baronial subjects and had succeeded in holding royal power in check thus preserving the liberties of the subject. That balance had been upset by the revival of letters in the thirteenth century, by the growth of luxury and by the alienation of baronial estates, as the barons sought ways of paying for a new consumption-orientated style of life. It was a disastrous moment in Europe's history. Luxury and the commerce it generated, had corrupted the manners of Europe's baronial class and had fatally undermined its economic and military power base. It had destroyed the fundamental principle on which the feudal constitution rested, tipping the balance of power and property in favour of kings and threatening the liberties of subjects and nations alike. There was nothing nostalgic about Fletcher's thinking, no longing for a return to an age that was now irrevocably lost. The message of the decline of European feudalism was that it was up to modern rulers and patriots to devise new ways of ensuring that the forces which had brought about the destruction of the feudal world could be used to lay the foundations of a free state system appropriate to the conditions of the modern age.

In a remarkable essay on the decline of the Spanish monarchy, Fletcher analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the enormous monarchies of the modern age. He saw the Spanish Empire as a rag-bag of disconnected political units located in Europe and the New World which required the deployment of massive military naval and financial resources to maintain them. These were resources which Spain could scarcely afford and it was this that accounted for the waning of Spanish power. For Fletcher, the lessons of Spain were that enormous monarchies would only survive and prosper if they were much more tightly integrated geographically, administratively and economically but that they would only avoid the disaster of becoming despotisms if their provinces and dependencies possessed viable economies and potentially co-operative elites. The unwritten, ominous message behind this analysis was that only France, and possibly England among the present states of Europe could hope to fulfil these conditions and, as Fletcher was well

aware, his own country was not short of noblemen and gentlemen who would be prepared to co-operate with the English court if the price was right.

Fletcher was to argue that these conditions could never be met by absolute monarchies. The problem was to envisage a system of limited monarchy appropriate to a great, composite monarchy. This was a question that was addressed to Scottish and English audiences. Like most Scots, he regarded the existing regal union as the root of Scotland's present problems. It had encouraged the English court to meddle in the business of the Scottish parliament and to corrupt its nobility. Its wars had disrupted the country's trade and its greedy nobility had rackrented their estates and ruined the country's agriculture to pay for an increasingly luxurious style of living. His message was that Britain, like the other enormous monarchies of the modern world Britain would only function as a politically viable state if it was rebuilt on new foundations and, for Fletcher, that meant drastically reducing the political and economic power of London and the Court and returning it to the regions and nations. In one of his last pamphlets he developed a Utopian vision of modern Britain as a state which had been divided into twelve equal semi-sovereign nations, each economically viable, each with its own political institutions, its own militia and its own capital city. Indeed in a visionary moment, Fletcher went so far as to envisage a free, stable European state system reconstructed, on such principles, its destinies in the hands of self governing, self-sufficient nations rather than its kings and emperors. And while such a system could never guarantee a state of perpetual peace,

> [……] yet certainly some constitutions of government are better fitted to maintain the public tranquillity than others. And in place of the continual great and ruinous wars, which questions about the succession of princes, and their ambitious designs, have intailed upon the world, things might be brought to less frequent contentions, and the publick animosities either

prevented from proceeding to open breaches; or if at some times wars could no way be avoided, they might be neither lasting nor bloody.[4]

Overall, Fletcher's message was clear. Scotland's problems were symptomatic of Europe's and could only be controlled by the sort of political engineering that would strengthen the economic, political and cultural power of provinces. For Fletcher the message of modern history to the emperors and nations of Europe was, modernise or perish.

Turning to David Hume's attitudes to Europe, means turning to a different generation and a different historical moment in Scottish history. But it also means turning to thinking which, like Fletcher's, was conditioned by Hume's understanding of his own country's fortunes and its changing relations with England. By the middle decades of the century the Anglo-Scottish union was not only a fact of political and cultural life but had been given definition by a distinctive ideology which Hume, like Fletcher was to articulate in a distinctive way. The Union itself had been the sort of arrangement Fletcher had feared most, an incorporating union which had transferred the powers of the Scots parliament and privy council to London. But paradoxically the power of Fletcherian thinking had been enough to ensure that Union would leave Scotland with the infrastructure of a viable civil society the effective control of which would remain in the hands of the existing Scottish political elite. The church, the legal system, the system of local government and the electoral system were left undisturbed and Scottish merchants were given free access to English markets at home and overseas as a concession to the Scots belief that the expansion of trade and commerce was essential to the rebuilding of the Scottish economy and to the maintenance of civil society. Hume was born in 1711 and grew up at a time when the new Union was experiencing a series of political, economic and psychological problems which served to emphasise the

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4 "An Account of a Conversation," Andrew Fletcher, *Andrew Fletcher*, p. 205.

formidable power of the Court, the painfully undeveloped state of the country's agriculture and manufactures, and the volatility of the developing west coast trade with England, Ireland and America. At the same time, it became clear that influential members of the church, the professions and the landed classes were seriously interested in the reconstructing the country's civil and ecclesiastical and cultural institutions in the Fletcherian belief that this would help Scotland to retain its civil society and foster its liberties and prospriety within the framework of an incorporating, parliamentary union.

Hume's distinctive views of Europe need to be seen as part of a sophisticated critical response to a shifting public culture and to a desire to define Scotland's position in the new British state. Philosophically his thinking about Europe had its roots in his understanding of the principles of human nature and was set out in a series of essays on the public culture of modern Britain published between 1741 and 1752 and in a remarkable and somewhat neglected six-volume History of England, published between 1754-1762. He developed the highly sceptical view that all knowledge was encapsulated in beliefs which were embedded in language and acquired in the course of common life as the result of our exposure to the sentiments of others. It was a line of thought that allowed him to develop an essentially anthropological view of the mind as a product of the circumstances in which it was formed, a view which emphasised the importance of property, prejudice and superstition in shaping an individual's mind and a society's culture. It was thinking which made it possible for him to think of national histories as part of the history of civilisation and, like Fletcher, his thinking about his own country's history was notable for being set in the context of the history of European civilisation, and the profound changes which had taken place since the decline of feudalism and the rise of commerce. It was this European sensibility that was to

turn him into a critic of the exceptionalist historical thinking of his contemporaries in England and Scotland and of the public culture of the new British state.[5]

Like Fletcher, Hume worked on the assumption that the modern state system had risen out of the ashes of a feudal system, emerging as a form of civilisation whose principles were still not properly understood. But whereas Fletcher had argued that feudal Europe was a form of civilisation founded on libertarian principles, Hume replied with notable sophistication and subtlety that the feudal system had been designed to extend the power of kings and had been built on principles which were bound to lead to perpetual civil war and to political disintegration. This analysis was spelled out in full in 1762 in the last chapters of his last substantial work, the History of England but it is clear from the language of his earlier essays that his thinking on this and the origins of the European state system had already taken shape in the 1740's, shortly after the publication of his philosophical masterpiece, A Treatise of Human Nature (1739-40). In an essay on 'The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences' (1742) Hume had made the notably proto-Montesquieuan observation that geography and climate had played a crucial role in adapting the feudal system to the conditions of different regions of Europe. He saw Europe as the most geographically diverse of all the world's continents 'the most broken by seas. rivers and mountains.'[6] It was this that explained the remarkable variety of national characteristics on display in the different countries of Europe and the various national jealousies that characterised their foreign relations. Indeed modern Europe had come to resemble the quarrelsome state system of ancient Greece which had ultimately been destroyed by national rivalries and incessant wars. On the other hand, the national jealousies which had fostered this rivalry were rooted in a spirit of emulation and competition which had made it possible for the Greeks to generate a culture which had been the glory of the ancient

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5 I have developed this line of thinking at greater length in Nicholas T. Phillipson, *Hume* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), chs. 3-4.
6 "The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences", David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1987), pp. 122-123.

world and example to moderns. Hume thought that both of these characteristics, national jealousy and a spirit of cultural emulation, had fertilised and weakened the fabric of the European state system and complicated its politics. For running though Hume's political essays was the fear that the international warfare which was characteristic of the modern age was being sustained by dynastic rivalries and a spirit of national jealousy rather than by any proper appreciation of the national interests of the states involved. It was being fed by huge military and naval budgets and a ruinous system of taxation which, if unchecked, would have disastrous consequences, weakening the economies of every European state and sowing discontent among their taxpayers. What alarmed Hume was that Europe's rulers had little understanding of the principles of commerce and conducted their commercial policies as they conducted their wars, to eliminate their competitors and capture their markets, a practice which Hume thought would lead to the destruction of the European economy and the state system which depended on it.

As Istvan Hont has recently suggested, Hume's thinking about national jealousy, is crucial to understanding his thinking about international trade and commerce, the governing economic principle of the European state system as he knew it.[7] But it is also crucial to his entire understanding of human nature. In his view, the natural desire to better ourselves, to seek and enjoy the 'conveniences' as well as the 'necessities' of life was an observable, fundamental fact of human behaviour, observable in every form of civilisation at every period of history and driven psychologically by a spirit of 'emulation' that was enlivening, pleasurable and potentially of profound importance to social progress. In his Political Discourses of 1752 Hume used this psychology to develop a theories of labour, money and commerce which were to be of foundational importance to the later enlightenment's political economy. But what matters here is that this same line of

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7 Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-state in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.), Introduction and Chapter 4.

thinking allowed Hume to build up a portrait of Europe as a vast and expanding market system which was powered by the competitive and emulative spirit of individuals whose labour would produce optimal results to themselves and to the public when they were free to use their labour as they pleased, without the interruptions and inhibitions that government restrictions and religious and ethical taboos might pace upon them. Under such circumstances, Hume wrote, Europe's rulers would quickly discover that the tendency of commerce was to render people more industrious, more productive, more content, and more loyal.

> Laws, order, politics, discipline; these can never be carried to any degree of perfection, before human reason has refined itself by exercise, and by an application to the more vulgar arts, at least, of commerce and manufacture. Can we expect, that a government will be well modelled by a people, who know not how to make a spinning-wheel, or to employ a loom to advantage? Not to mention that all ignorant ages are infested with superstition, which throws the government of its bias, and disturbs men in the pursuit of their interest and happiness.[8]

It was free markets rather than the sort of political engineering Fletcher had imagined that would secure the future peace and prosperity of modern Europe and preserve the liberties of those who lived in the provinces and on the peripheries as well as at the metropolitan hub of its enormous monarchies.

This was the framework in which Hume set his brilliant critique of the political culture of modern Britain. Britain's rulers, like the rulers of so many modern states had developed foreign policies which generally had more to do with satisfying a sense of national jealousy than with pursuing carefully-considered reasons of state. Their commercial policies were conducted, like their wars in order to destroy their

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8 "Of Refinement in the Arts," David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary,* p. 273.

competitors rather than to foster the economic development of the European economy as a whole. For the policies of 'the most stupid and factious Barbarians in the World' as Hume once described the English political class, all too closely resembled the barbarians Tacitus had once described in Germania, as men who fought to destroy and not to conquer.[9]

In another paper, it would be possible to show that although neither Fletcher's or Hume's thinking about Europe was 'typical' of their Scottish contemporaries, each had set himself the task of theorising important aspects of the political culture of their country's political elite and had done so from a perspective that was non-metropolitan without being provincial. They were citizens of a small nation struggling with the problem of survival in a world of enormous monarchies with great overseas empires. They were interested in the lessons European history held for small nations as well as for great ones. And they saw that the future of liberty and security in modern Europe would depend to a lesser or greater degree on commerce. Fletcher's thinking picked up many of the ambivalences in his contemporaries understanding of commerce. It had helped to destroy liberty in the gothic world and would do so again unless the power of Europe's monarchies was held in check. On the other hand, there was no reason why properly managed economies should not serve as the basis for a new system of free government. If Fletcher's thinking articulated different aspects of his contemporaries political thinking, Hume's was designed to reshape it. Where Fletcher was ambivalent about the problem of commerce, Hume had no doubt of its civilising tendencies and of its value in promoting sociability and political stability in the peripheral territories of a great monarchy as well as in its courts. But where Fletcher had looked to new and elaborate forms of political engineering to ensure that commerce would enhance rather than corrupt a nation's liberties, Hume simply called on the present generation of rulers to use their magisterial powers to remove unnatural obstacles to

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9 David Hume-William Strahan, 25 October 1769, David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 2, p. 209.

the free flow of labour and capital. For him, the monarchies of a free commercial Europe would become naturally pluralistic politically, and with the civilising effects of commerce, pluralism would foster that spirit of emulation on which civil and international peace depended.

Fletcher and Hume wrote as Scots who shared their contemporaries sense that enlightened Scotland was now a modern Athens. It was a potent image. For all its culture, Athens had been unable to withstand the forces of imperial Rome. Nevertheless, it had provided its new imperial masters with the philosophers and philosophies that Rome had been unable to provide for itself and it was these that had provided the empire with the means of self-understanding. Fletcher and Hume wrote in the hope that they, like the Athenians, would be able to supply their imperial masters with a new philosophical understanding of the world they now dominated. It was this that encouraged them to write as Europeans who wanted to set the problems of the English state and its provinces in a European setting. For this sense of Europeaness was to be fundamental to theirs and post-Union Scotland's sense of national identity.