

Edinburgh Assembly and Scottish Enlightenment

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The 18th century was the period of scientific and social advancements in many countries with one of the most dynamic scenarios experienced in Scotland. Combination of economic growth and wider access to education resulted in the Scottish Enlightenment characterised by advancements in many fields of science including philosophy, political economy, architecture, medicine, geology, archaeology, and sociology. One of special interests for Scottish Enlightenment thinkers became the humanity. They were eager to explore the human behaviour through the prism of science creating “the science of man”. The Scottish science of man recognised importance of social interactions in the development of moral self. Indeed, Edinburgh gave plenty of opportunities to observe and experience these social interactions. Firstly, due to the cramped conditions of the Old Town where different members of the society freely mixed in everyday life. Secondly, through the creation of societies and discussions clubs. The most known of them is the Select Society founded by Alan Ramsay in 1754 for the purpose of “philosophical enquiry and the improvement of the members in the art of speaking”. However, prior to this, Alan Ramsay supported the development of theatrical scene and creation of Edinburgh (dance) Assembly.

Edinburgh Assembly was one of the first societies created in the 18th century Edinburgh and existed through the “long Eighteenth Century”. It left a considerable trace in Edinburgh Heritage from street names to magnificent Assembly rooms in the heart of the Edinburgh New Town. Some of the dances invented and performed at the Assembly at the time are still practiced today thanks to the efforts of Royal Scottish Country Dance Society to preserve Scottish dances. Since its beginning the Assembly sparked a debate between church and town officials and literate circles wishing for “Old Reeky ... grow politt with the rest of the world.” People of town and countryside were widely different in their opinions about it. For some it was a “place desired for the healthful and mannerly dancing”, for others- “Machine of Luxury” that distracted the youth from arts and science where they might prove themselves useful. Apart from providing the regulated opportunity for the young Scots to meet, socialise and practice their dance skills the Assembly supported local charitable causes including infirmaries and workhouse as well as local manufacturers.

In this work I would like to explore the roles of Edinburgh Assembly in the town and country life in the 18th century. In particular, the comparison will be made between two stages of the Edinburgh Assembly existence: before and after Jacobite rising of 1745, to understand how its organisation and atmosphere influenced life in Scotland, the Scottish Enlightenment and formation of the national identity through the choice of dance and music.