

Book Reviews

Emerson, Roger L.: *Professors, Patronage and Politics: The Aberdeen Universities in the Eighteenth Century*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1991, 181 pp., £8.95.

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This volume is part of a series of quincennial studies in the history of the University of Aberdeen. In 1995, the University of Aberdeen will have been in existence for 500 consecutive years. At Aberdeen, King's College and University was founded in 1495 and Marischal College in 1593. In 1860, they came together to form one University. Last year, Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology achieved University status thus, today, Aberdeen has two universities once again and Scotland continues to provide wide-ranging courses in higher education.

According to the author, a Canadian scholar who has made a special study of Scotland, King's College, throughout its history, was 'family dominated, more nepotistic and more faction ridden'. By contrast, Marischal College, especially after 1715, became an institution handled by Scottish political managers but was much more outward looking, whilst King's remained a closed and tightly knit corporation.

This original and meticulously detailed study draws heavily on sources not previously examined and re-establishes the importance of Aberdeen in Jacobite politics in the years prior to 1715. What emerges from Emerson's monograph is the disconcerting way in which the new philosophy of the Enlightenment went hand in hand with the political jobbery and nepotism of both Universities in the eighteenth century.

In my view, by far the most interesting chapter deals with the Jacobite nature of the Colleges between 1690 and 1717 which eventually led to the large scale purge of academics in both Colleges.

This is a fascinating book as it shows just how unique Aberdeen as a centre of learning was in the 18th and 19th centuries. Patronage existed on a massive scale but it is important to note, as the author makes clear, that the introduction of political control over the actual recruitment of professors did not entirely rob them of their freedom to teach what they wanted in the classroom.

As the author shows, the power of the Crown was brought to bear by such Scottish stalwarts as Lords Islay and Bute and after 1780 by Henry Dundas. Emerson makes it clear it was not the mid-19th century that reformers, 'Strengthened senates and somewhat insulated Universities from local and Regional politics. By that time these institutions had also lost some of their local identity as they became more British in their staffing. That they remained Scottish in their outlook of education, in their curricula, in their student recruitment policies and in the work expectations of their teaching staff points to the continued resistance of Scots into a homogeneous British society - homogenised to English tastes.'

Undoubtedly the Scottish Enlightenment sprang from progressive Scots like Dundas who controlled and managed patronage but it was sustained by that very same patronage which gave academics the time, opportunity, and above all a way of earning their living in order to propound their views.

What makes this such an interesting study is the way in which Professor Emerson demonstrates that the history of an institution can throw interesting light on both society and politics. As such, this modest little monograph is an important contribution not just to the history of Aberdeen but to that of Scotland.

Henry Cowper

The Open University in Scotland, Edinburgh, United Kingdom