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NORTHERN LIGHTS

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How modern life emerged from eighteenth-century Edinburgh.

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On January 8, 1697, at some time between two and four in the afternoon, an eighteen-year-old student named Thomas Aikenhead was hanged in Edinburgh. Aikenhead had been found guilty of a serious charge: the previous year he had several times told other young men that the doctrines of Christian theology were “a rhapsodie of feigned and ill-invented nonsense.” Aikenhead’s friends, testifying against him, told the court that he had spoken of “the Imposter Christ” and had rejected the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Redemption. Aikenhead recanted all these sentiments—he said he had fallen under the spell of atheistical tracts—but no one defended him, and the jury voted for death. On the scaffold, Aikenhead declared that he had come to doubt the objectivity of good and evil, and that he believed moral laws to be the work of governments or men. His disastrous misstep—the joshing blasphemies about Christianity—point toward the anti-Christian side of the French Enlightenment, toward Voltaire’s suave pagan ironies and sarcasms. The student’s last statement—that moral laws are the work of governments and men—is one of the assumptions behind the American Revolution. The remark anticipates, as well, the British liberalism of the nineteenth century and the enduring work, and enduring trial, of modernity.

That work gathered steam soon after Aikenhead’s death. James Buchan, the author of the recent “Crowded with Genius” (HarperCollins; \$29.95), a vivacious and erudite celebration of the flowering of Scottish intellectual life in the eighteenth century—the Scottish Enlightenment, as people now call it—maintains that Aikenhead’s execution “haunted” the century that followed. Just six decades after the student’s rant to his friends, an Edinburgh ecclesiastical assembly attempted to excommunicate the freethinking Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume, perhaps the most thoroughgoing skeptic in the history of philosophy, believed that religion is a portrait not of how the cosmos works but of how the human mind works—of what men and women want and need. His view of life was worldly and sociable. Like many of the learned Scots, he revered the new science of Copernicus, Bacon, Galileo, Kepler, Boyle, and Newton; he believed in the experimental method and loathed superstition. Hume was admired in Edinburgh by some, disdained or dismissed by many others. But, after a tumultuous debate, the motion to excommunicate him failed, by a vote of fifty to seventeen. Hume’s chief tormentor, a splenetic clergyman named George Anderson, died a few months later, and, Buchan concludes, “an ecclesiastical era drew to an end.”

In the years between the two trials, Edinburgh had changed from a dour near-theocracy to a cosmopolitan center. Not just Hume and Adam Smith and James Boswell but a host of superb lesser figures burst into public acclaim. The fountainhead was Francis Hutcheson, a kind of pan-Enlightenment figure, who, from 1729 until his death, in 1746, held the chair in moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, where he broke with tradition by lecturing in English as well as Latin. Hutcheson, a frequent visitor to Edinburgh, was Adam Smith's teacher and he encouraged Hume's early efforts. He was suspicious of metaphysics or any claims not based on observation or experience. Empiricism and the inductive method was the clarion call of the Scottish Enlightenment. Space, time, mass, movement, force—these things could be known in a way that such metaphysical imponderables as “divine purpose” and “final causes” could not.

The intellectual break with the past was drastic and seemingly irreversible. In 1770, James Hutton, an experimental farmer and the owner of a sal ammoniac works, began poking into the peculiar shapes and textures of the Salisbury Crags, the looming, irregular rock formations in Edinburgh. Hutton noticed something astonishing—fossilized fish remains embedded in the rock. The remains suggested that volcanic activity had raised the mass from some depth in the sea. In 1785, he delivered a lecture to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which included the remarkable statement that “with respect to human observation, this world has neither a beginning nor an end.” Coolly discarding Biblical accounts of creation, the book that he eventually published, “The Theory of the Earth,” helped establish the foundations of modern geology. Shortly before Hutton's investigation, in 1769, James Watt refashioned the steam engine. In recent years, scholars have traced the rudiments of modern psychology, anthropology, the earth sciences, and theories of civil society and liberal education to eighteenth-century Scotland.

For those who keep track of such things, the Scots, in current accounts of intellectual history, have caught up with the French as leading exponents of Enlightenment thought. Yet the learned Scots were remarkably unlike the French *philosophes*; indeed, they were unlike any other group of philosophers that ever existed. In a gigantic study, “The Sociology of Philosophies,” published in 1998, Randall Collins assembled structural portraits of the seminal moments in philosophy, both Western and Eastern. Typically, the most important figures in a given cluster of thinkers (perhaps three or four men) would jockey for centrality while cultivating alliances with other thinkers or students on the margins. In the Scottish group, however, there was little of the bristling, charged, and exclusionary fervor of the Diderot-d'Alembert circle; or of the ruthless atmosphere found in Germany in the group that included Fichte, the Schelling brothers, and Hegel; or of the conscious glamour of the existentialists in postwar Paris. The Scots vigorously disagreed with one another, but they lacked the temperament for the high moral drama of quarrels, renunciations, and reconciliation. Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, along with Adam Ferguson and Thomas Reid, were all widely known, but none of them were remotely cult figures in the style of Hegel, Marx, Emerson, Wittgenstein, Sartre, or Foucault. To an astonishing degree, the men supported one another's projects and publications, which they may have debated at a club that included amateurs (say, poetry-writing doctors, or lawyers with an interest in science) or in the fummy back room of some dark Edinburgh tavern. In all, the group seems rather like an erudite version of Dickens's chattering and benevolent Pickwick Club.

The Scots were conservatives and radicals at the same time. They prized social order, and peace and quiet; they also sought intellectual revolution—new ways of looking at how the mind works, how morality works, and how we live in society. The religious strife of the seventeenth century, including the judicial murder of a reckless student, disgusted them. They could not imagine, and did not desire, civil society without religion. But they wanted to ease God out of scientific research and out of political and social life, too. And they wanted to naturalize morality—to locate the foundations of morals somewhere else than in revelation and fear of eternal damnation. Indeed, their greatest ambition was to try to establish something implied by Aikenhead’s gallows speech: an account of civil society demonstrating that legal and ethical rules were of human origin.

Their version of morals had to compete with some nasty suppositions. In “Leviathan,” published in 1651, Thomas Hobbes had developed a mechanistic view of human behavior: men were entirely amoral; they reacted positively to anything that gratified their self-interest, calling it “good,” but the reaction was no more than a mechanical response to a stimulus. Unless they were overawed by a strong central authority, men would quickly be at one another’s throats. The Scots were also familiar with the Duc de La Rochefoucauld’s “Maximes,” a wickedly funny collection of aphorisms that dissolved virtue in the acid of self-interest. If we performed a benevolent act, La Rochefoucauld suggested, we did so in order to stoke our vanity or to seek a return of favor. But Hutcheson, and also Hume and Smith, were repelled by such fashionable cynicism; they were determined to prove that virtue was grounded in human nature itself.

How could so many modern ways of thinking have emerged in so seemingly backward a place? Buchan, a journalist, essayist, and novelist, describes the physical substance of Edinburgh with enormous gusto. In 1700, the city had its towers, its ancient castle, and a magnificently broad long street running down its center. A walled city built on a high butte with a gentle lake on one side, Edinburgh was stunningly beautiful but dirty and poor, a foul-smelling, mucky place whose citizens tossed their wastes onto the street at night while a cloud of peat smoke hung in the sky above—“auld reekie,” it was affectionately called by its inhabitants. The common diet, dreary and conducive to alcoholism, consisted of fish, pottage, milk, kale, and a great deal of home-brewed small beer. James Boswell, when he was not in London pursuing Dr. Johnson and women, may have been Edinburgh’s most famous drunk, but there were many others. Everyone, including children, drank whiskey, claret, rum, and ale. By the middle of the century, there were six hundred drinking establishments servicing a town of only forty thousand. Buchan says that there were few public buildings, so that all legal, civic, and ecclesiastical business was conducted in dark taverns.

At the same time, religious authorities nagged at Edinburgh’s citizenry. The doctrinaire were unwilling to countenance privacy of belief—the Devil, after all, lurked everywhere, so individual conscience was a matter for the community and the Church. As late as 1719, Presbyterian tracts raged against truants from Sabbath worship “walking through fields, parks, links, meadows,” or, even worse, “misspending their time in idle discourse, vain and useless communication.” These Sabbath strictures were enforced by a kind of religious police known as

the Seizers, who, operating like Saudi enforcers today, collared people on the street and sent them into dank churches, where they were subjected to threatening sermons on the punishments for fornication. Edinburgh in the early eighteenth century, Buchan says, “looked and smelled like a medieval city.”

It was an inauspicious place for intellectual revolution. Yet there were long-standing institutions of true distinction in Edinburgh, including the printing presses and the university. And Scottish Protestantism, however sour and intrusive, was a revolutionary force. John Knox, the brimstone-tempered Scot who founded the Presbyterian movement in the sixteenth century, had insisted on universal literacy; worshippers were expected to read the Bible and enter into intense communion with God on their own. Every congregation had its school, its local library, its contentious readers. And those who were well educated were extraordinarily well educated. Scotland had long maintained close ties to universities in Holland and France, and the scholars returning from Leiden or the Sorbonne were up to date on European intellectual currents in a way that men at Cambridge and Oxford often were not.

The tie with England was fraught with ambiguous tensions and dependencies, but, in the end, the economic benefits were real. The country’s political union with England, in 1707, may have occasioned resentment and nationalist nostalgia, but it gave Scotland access to world markets dominated by the British Empire. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Edinburgh had become prosperous from foreign trade. The harbor at nearby Leith was filled with ships, and public companies were being formed to produce iron, sugar, glass, and rope. The city’s need for new housing for its emerging class of merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and lawyers, as well as for some venue besides taverns in which to conduct business, was finally answered by the construction, starting in the seventeen-fifties, of the superb New Town, with its Georgian squares and handsome houses and ballrooms. In religion, affluence helped tame doctrinaire fury into debonair moderation; Edinburgh ministers became polished and even elegant figures who wrote poetry and appeared at fashionable dinner parties and clubs. By the second half of the century, Buchan says, Edinburgh represented “a new social existence that is suave, class-conscious, sensitive, law-abiding, hygienic . . . in short, modern.” The Scots were free men in a state of protected semi-responsibility, and they found themselves eager to examine the basis of society.

Early in his career, David Hume devoted a chapter in “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding” (1748) to disputing miracles. One might have supposed that miracles were beyond proof and therefore beyond argument, but Hume didn’t think so. “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature,” he asserts, and then engages in a lawyerly interrogation of the evidence. What’s the number and reliability of the witnesses? How close are they to the event itself? For Hume, the question is not whether miracles happen but under what conditions belief in them spreads. He moves the discussion from revelation to epistemology and arrives at the following mischievous conclusion: “No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish.”

Hume was greatly impressed by the recent news that nature operated according to laws provable

by repeated experiment; he must have feared that the uncritical acceptance of Biblical miracles put at risk our ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. If it was possible to clear away the superstition and speculation that had passed for science in the past, could something analogous be done in political and moral philosophy?

Wisdom, for Hume, begins with the acknowledgment of uncertainty—of the *limits* of what we know. We have perceptions of the world in the form of impressions, Hume says, some of which, in recollection, become ideas—that is, the ideas have the force of impressions, without which they are meaningless. We're able to navigate our way through the world because such impressions of it are coherent; they support one another with respect to time and space. But the power of reason to prove much of what we know is weak, and Hume denied that our beliefs about the world could be ascertained with anything like scientific certainty. Events occur in a particular sequence (a billiard ball, struck by another, moves forward), yet reason cannot establish that one event necessarily causes another. Sequence should not be confused with causality. The best we can say is that our repeated experience of the sequence allows us to believe that it will occur in the future. Hume was fascinated by what we would call consciousness, but he always leads us back to experience, which is the arena, the test, the goal.

Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711. His father was a lawyer who died when the boy was very young, his mother the daughter of a prominent judge. Hume was being groomed for law when, at the age of thirteen, epic poetry and philosophy overwhelmed him; he read obsessively until, at eighteen, he developed hypochondriacal tendencies and suffered a kind of nervous breakdown, an event from which he recovered by exercising and by eating a great deal (a lifelong habit—he became enormously fat). A convivial bachelor, he required company, preferably a dinner party at home (he prided himself on his “cookery”) or a debate at the Select Society, a group of fifty of Edinburgh's most clubbable and erudite minds. Hume had no recorded romantic life, though he enjoyed the company of elegant women in Edinburgh and in Paris, where he was certifiably a success (“*le bon David*”) among the aristocratic ladies who entertained intellectual luminaries. His friend Adam Smith, born a little later, in 1723, was an asexual bachelor, too. The men shared temperamental quirks, derived, perhaps, from similarities in their childhoods. Both were reared by their mothers—Smith's father, a customs inspector, died before he was born, and as a middle-aged man Smith still lived with his mother (and his maiden cousin). Except for the recklessly energetic Boswell, who recounted his heroic copulations in his journal, the Scottish intellectuals were given less to sensuality than to the comforts of a solitary domestic routine and easy fellowship with friends.

Sociability was what mattered, and in their writings the world, teeming yet measurable, is always with them, so much so that reading them confirms the reality behind such abundant eighteenth-century fictions as Henry Fielding's “Tom Jones.” The view is masculine, conservative, hedonistic: good fellows write poetry, study science and philosophy, do business, practice law, and gather at the end of the day for a drink, and let's not have any nonsense about austerity or purity.

Defining certain regularities in one's experience of the world—if not with scientific precision, then at least with observational rigor—was central to the problem of moral theory. What *were*

the social arrangements in which these regularities appeared and in which our moral life was carried out? By the mid-eighteenth century, the Scots had realized that the acts of kings and queens and the words of religious or humanist sages were less important—less formative of social life—than such things as modern manufacture, commerce, and international trade.

Early in “The Wealth of Nations,” the colossal book published in 1776 but first conceived many years before, Adam Smith announced, “Nobody ever saw a dog make a fair and deliberate exchange of one bone for another with another dog. Nobody ever saw one animal by its gestures and natural cries signify to another, this is mine, that yours; I am willing to give this for that.” Looking about him at mid-century, Smith saw a great deal of “trucking” and bartering—a vast, buzzing, articulated landscape of productive and commercial activity that connected everyone to everyone else. In a stirring passage, he evokes the seemingly rude existence of a day laborer. The man’s woollen coat, kitchen implements, and glass windows can be produced only by the combined labor and coördinated exchange of literally thousands of individuals (“ship-builders, sailors, sail-makers, rope-makers . . .”), as well as by the contribution of such institutions as farms, mines, mills, smithies, shipping companies. National wealth, Smith insisted, consists in the sum total of productive activities, such as those which furnish the laborer’s house—and not, as earlier economic theory maintained, in the amount of gold and silver hoarded in state treasuries, or the total agricultural output protected by tariffs. Smith’s analytic framework amounts to a shift in consciousness of how the world works, of how individuals fit into a national economy: it is the birth of the gross domestic product, the recognition that national wealth is something created by the entire populace.

For Smith, commerce was the glue that held the show together. “The offering of a shilling, which to us appears to have so plain and simple a meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so,” Smith said in an early lecture. “And in this manner everyone is practicing oratory on others through the whole of his life.” The men and women in this vast system of speech are performing as rational agents, freely selling their labor and goods, exchanging, buying, and consuming. This rational actor calculates his best advantage in any given situation and gets what he wants by appealing to the same calculating instinct in others. “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner,” he wrote, “but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.” What Smith is describing is the ethos that came to be called capitalism. A startling irony proceeds from his formulation, an irony confounding to the literal-minded and outrageous to those who demand moral consistency of the world. Each man, imagining that he’s working for his own advantage, is at the same time inadvertently working to increase the general wealth. The mechanism that transforms the many self-advancing efforts into general affluence is, of course, the market, along with its attendant bodyguard and ruthless enforcer, competition—the two of them, in tandem, ceaselessly setting wages and prices, adjusting supply and demand, goading, redirecting, enlarging, rewarding, annihilating.

In Smith’s system, commercial man might not be docile, exactly, but he could be governed, and, just as important, he could learn to tolerate his neighbor’s religion in order to do business with

him. In the nineteenth century, Smith's happy view of life in commercial society was rejected by the Romantics as insipid and by the Marxists as naïve, a mask for the despair of alienation. The later development of industrial capitalism, including the emergence, after Smith's death, of dangerous factories and the immiseration of workers jammed into enormous sordid cities, was not something that Smith had envisioned. But his frequently stated belief in minimal government interference with the economy—the doctrine of *laissez-faire*—should not be taken as passive acceptance of the depredations of capitalism. Adam Smith was not an earlier version of Milton Friedman or Jack Kemp. He would not have been pleased with the inequities of income in the United States today. He defended the rights of labor and deplored the withering effects of specialization on the individual worker. Smith was a liberal in both the modern and the classical sense. Buried in the work of the great framer of capitalism as a vast impersonal system, there is a modern humanist.

Modern market societies, Smith and Hume thought, made men more reasonable, even more “polite,” but neither of them supposed that commercial relations provided all the values that men needed to live by. Their mentor Francis Hutcheson, writing in 1725, had suggested that, just as people derived involuntary pleasure from beauty, so they spontaneously delighted in performing or observing benevolent actions. Benevolence made us feel good in the same way that a Greek statue does. The moral response matched the aesthetic response; disgust at ugliness was matched by disgust at cruelty; together, these responses constituted a kind of natural moral sense. Hutcheson was so sure that we enjoyed the spectacle of virtue that he made a weird kind of hedonic calculation, a numerical system in which different acts were rated according to the pleasure they gave.

Hutcheson, who invented the phrase “the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers,” which the utilitarians made so much of in the next century, reflects the peculiarly sunny temperament of the Scottish moralists. His system depends on our possession of favorable innate tendencies; to him, the moral sense was just that—a sense, akin to sight or smell. Hume, in “An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals” (1751), tries to put a little muscle into Hutcheson's pleasant ideas. He begins by admitting, as always, the limited powers of reason: by itself, reason can no more give us notions of virtue and vice than it can prove a necessary connection between events. “ ’Tis not contrary to reason,” Hume once said, “to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.” Reason lacks power to command, judge, or reform behavior. Common observation suggests, on the contrary, that morality is based on sentiment and passion: we look at Nero, or at a neighborhood thief, and we feel disgust. Like knowledge of the world, moral sentiment begins with particular *impressions*—a key idea, since it suggests that we should make moral judgments individually rather than by category.

What causes the impressions? It turns out that there are a few kindly elements in human nature, caused by the experience of family love in childhood, that could be called universal:

It is sufficient for our present purpose, if it be allowed, what surely, without the greatest absurdity, cannot be disputed, that there is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for human kind; some particle of the dove, kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and

serpent. Let these generous sentiments be supposed ever so weak; let them be insufficient to move even a hand or finger of our body; they must still direct the determinations of our mind, and where everything else is equal, produce a cool preference of what is useful and serviceable to mankind, above what is pernicious and dangerous. A *moral distinction*, therefore, immediately arises; a general sentiment of blame and approbation; a tendency, however faint, to the objects of the one, and a proportionable aversion to those of the other.

In describing the benefits of human nature, Hume sounds almost plaintive; he asks for our belief in a minimal case for human decency. Beginning with this minimal case, Hume, in an earlier book, “A Treatise of Human Nature” (1740), laid out a genealogy of morals. In the family unit of primitive society, people acted generously toward one another, so there was no need for formal rules. But when families banded together for convenience, safety, and support, property fell into dispute, and formal rules, which is what Hume means by “justice”—what’s yours and what’s mine—became necessary. As communities develop in size, men’s natural selfishness, without disappearing, is joined by enlightened self-interest—an approval of what is good for the community and thus good for you and me. That common standard created by enlightened self-interest is what we call morality. In Hume’s language, universal traits like benevolence, kindness, and love for one’s children are “natural” virtues, while socially necessary traits like courage, honesty, justice, and loyalty are “artificial” virtues; that is, they are engendered by our need to live with one another. All societies admire such virtues and disdain cowardice, dishonesty, treachery, and meanness. We are angered by criminal behavior even if we are not hurt by it personally. Everyone, or almost everyone, weeps or smiles at the same point in a play. Human nature exists, and moral codes created by our need to live together exist, too.

You can see the common standards, Hume says, by noting the language that people use. If someone designates another as “adversary,” he speaks only for himself; if he describes another as “odious,” he is appealing to widespread feelings of distaste. Hume is speaking not only of the common language of business or law but of the gossip at the vegetable market and the water well. Hobbes and La Rochefoucauld and the other moral skeptics, it turns out, were partly right in their description of human nature, but, in the end, paradoxically, a moral code is created, not defeated, by self-interest: we create a code precisely because we have mutually opposed interests but must learn to live with one another. If one studies the language, Hume urged, one can see that most people approve of what is socially useful, disapprove of what is socially destructive, and remain indifferent to acts that express individual self-interest. We can build morality on the first two and allow the third a free existence without judging it one way or another.

Hume’s “Principles of Morals” lacks beauty, passion, and drama. There is no perversity or darkness in this worldly view. Hume’s is the everyday view, the life-as-it-is-commonly-lived view, a forerunner of both utilitarianism and pragmatism. Human nature, sentiment, and sociality itself create morals. In a society held together by commerce and property, and by law based on property—modern democratic society—such commonsense ideas offer the minimal but necessary faith. Hume and the other Enlightenment Scots anticipated a civil order in which most people would continue to adhere to religion but would rely less and less on God as a guide to everyday life. Such reliance would be replaced by a modified confidence in the successful functioning of institutions like the legal system, the civil service, schools and universities, and business and commerce. The administration of such enterprises is the ideal of “instrumental

rationality,” as Max Weber called it, by which things run impersonally and reasonably well for everyone—not a spiritually impassioned way of life, to be sure, and by no means sufficient to satisfy many of our desires, but one that allows, as an over-all framework, for the greatest individual development, the greatest freedom. It’s a framework that most Americans, even very religious Americans, actually depend on from day to day—the unspoken rationale of American secular liberty. Capitalism and liberal society don’t seem especially heroic until threatened by fanatics; only then do people have to fight for what they’ve taken for granted.

Returning to his house in the New Town one day in 1769, Hume, monstrously fat by then, fell into a bog and despaired of extrication until an old fishwife happened by. She agreed to help “Hume the atheist” only after he recited the Lord’s Prayer. By late in the century, the energies of the Scottish Enlightenment had begun to run down. The mood of Edinburgh was soured by nasty anti-Catholic disturbances in 1779 (a precursor of the violent Gordon Riots, in London, the following year). When the revolution came to France, in 1789, intellectual Edinburgh turned reactionary and fearful—the threat of being blamed for “sedition” stifled what was left of the spirit of radical inquiry. The city remained a cosmopolitan commercial center, but for some years the serious intellectual and political work had been done elsewhere—in America, for instance. Jefferson’s ideal of sociability in the new republic was, according to Gary Wills, influenced by Hutcheson; Madison learned a great deal from both Hume’s political theories and Smith’s “invisible hand”; Hamilton knew “The Wealth of Nations” backward and forward; and all three campaigned successfully to make the separation of church and state a feature of the Constitution. Summing up the influence of the Scots, Buchan says, “In demanding that experiment not inherited truth define the business of living, the Edinburgh philosophers stamped the West with its modern scientific and provisional character. They created a world that tended towards the egalitarian and, within reason, the democratic. Their prestige in English-speaking lands was carried on the wave of British and American expansion into every corner of the world.”

These sentences may make some of us wince. The wall between church and state that we are urging on the Iraqis has grown thinner in America. And a country in which something like seventy per cent of the population believes in Satan and a considerable number disdains evolutionary biology is unlikely to be one in which “experiment not inherited truth” is flourishing. At the moment, religiosity—the substitution of faith for common sense in practical affairs—is running amok in the United States, and intrusions of religion into science, politics, and culture, contrary to the spirit of the Founding Fathers, have become commonplace. For us, as for the Scots, modernity is a project; it has never been a settled accomplishment.

Describing his crisis at the age of eighteen, Hume later wrote to a friend, “I found a certain Boldness of Temper, growing in me, which was not enclin’d to submit to any Authority,” a rebellion that led him to “seek out some new Medium, by which Truth might be establish’.” Aikenhead the blasphemer was also eighteen when he made the remarks that destroyed him, and it’s tempting to see the great philosopher and the loudmouth student as spiritual comrades joined by an inability to accept dictation from others. Aikenhead wept in his cell as he awaited

execution, but recovered his nerve and made his scaffold speech. In 1776, a few weeks after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, David Hume lay on his deathbed as a man of sixty-five, and was described as remarkably calm by all the friends who came to visit him. In retrospect, Hume's death scene has taken on an emblematic significance. He may have been the first famous man in Christian Europe to face the prospect of annihilation—he refused to believe in an afterlife—without alarm. He joked with Boswell that immortality, if it existed, would have to be universal and would therefore permit infants without reason and worthless drunks to be saved. What Hume and the other Scottish savants wanted was a society that was not ruled by fear or by superstition imposed by authority; a society that was burgeoning, progressive, affluent, and tolerant. The ideals that they lived by, and the institutions that sprang from them, remain as strong, and as fragile, as ever. ✦