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SELF-IMPROVEMENT SOCIETIES: THE EARLY 'LIT. AND PHILS.'

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MOST OF THE NEW SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS that spread from London to the provinces in the eighteenth century were unisex. Men and women alike frequented the assemblies, theatres, concerts, pleasure gardens, promenades, fashionable shopping streets, and the other arenas of public display. Not so with clubs however. Meeting at coffee-houses, taverns, hired rooms, and sometimes private houses, the length and breadth of Georgian England,[1] clubs were overwhelmingly, 'chauvinistically' male. It is true that a female coffee-house culture might be found in a spa like Bath, and that bluestockings such as Mrs Montagu and Mrs Thrale struggled to naturalize the Parisian *salon* on English soil. Yet from the women's side the only successful riposte to the masculine club seems to have been the tea-party — a cultural phenomenon whose history remains to be written.

If the first characteristic of a club was its masculinity, the second was its exclusiveness. Members were able to pick and choose who joined them, quietly blackballing the undesirables. This had several advantages. Meetings could be restricted to boon companions or to a clique sharing similar interests. Close familiarity and privacy, usually abetted by nicotine and alcohol, helped to loosen tongues and sharpen wits. As that consummate clubman's magazine *The Spectator* itself observed (no. 68): 'In Proportion, as Conversation gets into Clubs and Knots of Friends, it descends into Particulars, and grows more free and communicative'. If on top of that members had other points in common, so much the better. Addison poked fun at the pretexts on which clubs might be formed, describing associations of very fat and very thin men, or of men who happened to bear the same name.[2] But in practice they were astonishingly diverse: clubs political, clubs military, naval, medical, legal, commercial, agricultural, religious, charitable, literary, musical, sporting, antiquarian, bibliophile, scientific, clubs of dandies or rakes, or bee-keepers, or Welshmen; companies of debaters, circulating book clubs, conversazioni, masonic lodges, mutual benefit associations, 'clubs upstairs' (in William Cowper's condescending lines)

> To which th'unwashed artificer repairs,
> T'indulge his genius after long fatigue,
> By diving into cabinet intrigue . . .[3]

The precocious mathematical societies of London and Manchester; the mid-century Linnaean botanists at Norwich; the Select Society of Edinburgh with its coruscating displays of oratory; Edward Jenner's Convivio-Medical Society hobnobbing in rural Gloucestershire; Swarley's Club at Newcastle upon Tyne where the wood-engraver Thomas Bewick spent such happy 'rational' hours until the anti-Jacobinism of the 1790s swept it away.[4] Memoirs and correspondence of the period furnish a host of references to clubbishness of every kind. Jovial sets of drinkers and regular diners-out at one end of the spectrum; snobbish metropolitan institutions like the Royal Society at the other; and somewhere in between those provincial groups in pursuit of useful knowledge, rational entertainment, and perhaps cultural status, that I now wish to examine.

Outside London the best-documented societies before 1750 are some of those in the East Midlands, pioneered at Spalding in 1712 and with offshoots or imitations over the next four decades at Stamford, Peterborough, Nocton near Lincoln, Wisbech, Boston, and Doncaster.[5] Maurice Johnson, barrister of the Inner Temple and former *habitué* of Button's Club in Covent Garden, was the moving spirit behind the Gentlemen's Society at Spalding, which arose out of an informal *Tatler*- and *Spectator*-reading circle and naturally won the instant approval of Addison, Steele and the London wits. But though they might mull over a poem from time to time, the Spalding group's focus was never to be literary in the narrow sense. These early societies were founded at the end of a remarkable surge in historical scholarship during which the nation's archives had been scoured for precedents to support or refute constitutional and religious arguments of the day. The documentary harvest had mostly been gathered in, but the study of the past now took a local and archaeological turn very congenial to provincial gentry proud of their genealogies, patriotic, classically educated, and living in neighbourhoods abounding in medieval and ancient sites.[6] The leading lights in several of the societies were antiquaries of national repute — especially William Stukeley at Stamford and Sir Francis Dashwood of the Lincoln Club — and intimate contacts were kept up through correspondence and visits with specialist circles in London, the Antiquaries and the Dilettanti. It was only to be expected that prehistoric remains, Roman artefacts, monastic records, and bygones generally would bulk quite large in their weekly deliberations. Moreover, no great culture gap then separated antiquarian pursuits from the investigation of natural phenomena — as witness the contents of so many private cabinets of curiosities or indeed the proceedings of the Royal Society at this period. Tumuli and ruined castles, minerals and fossils, flora and fauna, all ran together under the heading of topography. Hence natural history (covering biology and geology) and natural philosophy (experimental science) ranked with antiquities among the societies' interests, and it is worth noting that not only Sir Isaac Newton but also J. T. Desaguliers, the foremost science lecturer of the time and father of the itinerant popularizers, was an honorary member at Spalding. The founding of this Society coincided with the publication of John Morton's *Natural History of Northamptonshire*, a massive folio that demonstrated very well the possibilities of local fieldwork studies and perhaps inspired the botanic club that William Stukeley founded at Boston in Lincolnshire.[7] The religious dimension of all this should also not be overlooked, particularly in view of the Deist controversy. Just as Stukeley would soon be Christianizing archaeology (setting even the Druids in a framework of orthodoxy), so were scientific inquiries easily justified by appeal to natural theology. By 1709 John Ray's *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* had reached its fifth edition. The exquisite perfection of living things revealed by the microscope, Newtonian physics, Addison's 'spacious firmament on high', these all appeared to offer cast-iron proofs of a Divine Creator. The Anglican clergymen who with local gentry and professional men made up the early societies were therefore almost fulfilling a pious duty in collecting specimens and conducting experiments. These same arguments would be used a hundred years later when the findings of geology seemed to conflict with the account in Genesis.

The regular membership of the societies was small and select, but visits and communications were received from honorary members – a huge and extraordinary list of names in the case of Spalding, among them artists, merchants, surveyors, schoolmasters, seafarers, monks, diplomats, the illustrious and the obscure, and some of them stationed in distant parts of the globe. The Spalding regulars met for five or six hours every week, comfortably supplied with tobacco, refreshments, candles, and a warm fire. They shifted quarters several times and in 1743 were occupying a house with a garden and a suite of rooms hung with maps and lined with bookcases, cabinets of prints and coins and natural specimens, and — more unexpectedly — musical instruments, these no doubt coming into use every August at the

anniversary feast. The idea of members' personal improvement, which had been in Maurice Johnson's mind in first proposing the Society, gradually took on a practical aspect as they laid out a physic garden and studied drawings and models of farm equipment and drainage machines, but there is little evidence of any major projects resulting.

Johnson himself, botanist and numismatist, barrister and magistrate, inspired and cajoled the Spalding Society for over forty years, setting a style and creating a formula that others were glad to copy. In 1721, when John Cecil (Earl of Essex) and he were recorders for Stamford, they jointly started a society in the town on the Spalding model, an élitist little group to which the two Members of Parliament also belonged. After a decade or so it apparently lapsed, but in 1736 the ever-active William Stukeley re-established it as the Brazen Nose Society, and with six founder-members and a score of correspondents this new group was soon interesting itself in medieval seals, a map of the moon, a wasp's nest, magic lantern projections, and experiments with the microscope and an air-pump.[8] Meanwhile, over at Peterborough another society briefly flourished, initiated by a minor canon of the cathedral, Timothy Neve, who had once been librarian and treasurer of the Spalding Society. By 1741, when they mustered a score of resident members and a hundred or so honorary, they had accumulated a small library and, as Neve told a correspondent, a cabinet of curiosities 'such as shells, minerals, petrifactions, prints, medals, &c.&c.&c. which now and then amuse us a little, and give us the appearance of meeting to do something else than to smoke a pipe and drink a bottle'.[9] They may have been amateurs, but they were more serious than Neve's nonchalant tone suggests, having lately devoted their attention to magnetism, sunspots, fossils from nearby strata, an old volume of anatomical drawings, the history of Peterborough Abbey, the Roman mint at Lincoln, and the censorship of books. The cathedral dean presided at their weekly sessions and the participants included prebendary Thomas Robinson (editor of Hesiod), the physician Charles Balguy (translator of Boccaccio), and the first Earl Fitzwilliam. Obviously a distinguished set, though in terms of social standing perhaps surpassed by Dashwood's Lincoln Club, which met periodically at a country inn south-east of the city in a special room containing busts of the principal members with their coats of arms.[10]

All these were Establishment coteries, bonded by class, culture, education and religion — if not necessarily by politics. Many members appear to have been Cambridge graduates, but they were in any case interconnected in many other ways, within the group, between groups, and through a network of correspondents. Regionally based and close-knit, they nevertheless participated in the wider republic of letters, even if their actual achievements in adding to the stock of learning was in fact unimpressive. Having luminaries like Newton, Sloane, Pope, Addison, and Bentley on the roll-call, as the Spalding Society did, must have added some lustre and consequence to the proceedings besides impressing outsiders. In some respects they were part of a cultural freemasonry, and it is hardly irrelevant that the liberal masonic movement (in which Desaguliers was a key figure) was spreading into the provinces at this same period.

And yet, several decades on, these small-town societies had all disappeared except at Spalding, and to an observer in the 1780s even that looked moribund — meetings virtually abandoned, the museum in decay, the scientific instruments eaten with rust.[11] The East Midlands would eventually have its agricultural societies, but the taste for more intellectual gatherings had moved elsewhere, to the centres of growth and industry, where their character had been modified. And modified, moreover, by currents of progressive thought as well as by the change in environment. To a greater or lesser degree these later eighteenth-century circles, in which Dissenters and industrialists often predominated over Anglican divines and landed gentry, were stirred by Enlightenment visions of progress, of human perfectibility and universal justice attainable through rational education, political reform, religious toleration, benevolence, the efficient employment of labour and resources, and above all the

application of scientific discoveries and inventions to useful ends. The spread of such thinking, which stemmed not only from the Continent but from older English roots, is plainly too complex to trace in detail. The founding of the Society of Arts (to encourage agriculture, industry and commerce) in 1754 was itself influenced by the Baconian strain in Enlightenment philosophy as well as by more mundane considerations of national wealth and personal profit.[12] In its turn it affected the development of the agricultural improvement societies in the last quarter of the century, and indirectly the Royal Institution. Agencies with a more demonstrable impact on the new literary and philosophical societies were the lively intellectual circles of Enlightened Scotland and the English Dissenting academies, Warrington above all.[13] As regards Scotland it was not simply that the discussion clubs, lecture halls, and industrial workshops of Edinburgh and Glasgow were humming with fresh ideas about moral philosophy, the organization of society, medicine and chemistry, mechanics and geology; but also that many English physicians and surgeons trained north of the border, experienced the ferment of debate at first hand, and returned home with nostalgia for the intellectual excitements in Edinburgh. There were direct links too between Scottish scientists and scholars and the Academy at Warrington, which soon proved to be as notable for its encouragement of open-minded inquiry and discussion as for its ecumenical atmosphere or the unusual breadth of its curriculum. Close association between Warrington and nearby Liverpool was inevitable. Well-to-do Liverpolitan Dissenting families sent their sons to Warrington for a 'modern' education; the freethinking surgeon, Matthew Turner, took time from his Liverpool practice to lecture there; William Roscoe, soon to be the great promoter of cultural institutions on Merseyside, fell into the Warrington orbit at an impressionable age. And in return, the Warrington staff, Joseph Priestley among them, would sometimes join the cultivated circle of the Liverpool merchant Thomas Bentley, the Octagon Chapel, and the now little-known literary and scientific groups.[14]

Particularly in its earlier years the Lunar Society of Birmingham[15] was hardly more structured than the Warrington-Liverpool circle, with Erasmus Darwin for instance resident at Lichfield and Josiah Wedgwood in the Potteries. Though its origins remain hazy, dozens of connections with Scotland and Warrington could be listed; Darwin's father had even belonged to the Spalding Society; and Matthew Boulton, at whose house near the Soho factory many of their gatherings took place, may well have been enthused by his old friend Benjamin Franklin, founder of the Junto Club in Philadelphia (and who recommended the physician and scientist William Small to Birmingham in 1765, about the date meetings began). The Lunar Society never concerned itself with electing officers, keeping minutes, setting up a permanent headquarters with books and apparatus, or publishing its proceedings. It was essentially an entrepôt for information and a testing-ground of theories. One of its members, the inventor and Rousseau-devotee R. L. Edgeworth, emphasized just how significant were

> . . . the first hints of discoveries, the current observations, and the mutual collision of ideas . . . The knowledge of each member of such a society becomes in time disseminated among the whole body, and a certain *esprit de corps*, uncontaminated with jealousy, in some degree combines the talents of numbers to foward the views of a single person.[16]

Edgeworth was here speaking of an élite company of scientists, engineers and travellers who used to assemble in London at Old Slaughter's Coffee-House, but his comments applied just as aptly to the Lunar Society. For innovative technological entrepreneurs like Boulton, Watt, James Keir, and Wedgwood, news of scientific advances and inventions might have immediate industrial application and so gain them commercial advantage over rivals.[17] But the group had wider perspectives than steam power, metallurgical processes, and the chemistry of alkalis. They exchanged opinions about astronomy, electrical phenomena, geology and

botany — in some of which areas they had special expertise; and their horizons also encompassed educational reform, antiquities, and the arts. Societies of this kind have so often been considered solely in a context of industrialization and the history of experimental science that their broader, multi-disciplinary outlook is worth insisting on.

The Lunar Society's membership boundaries were always fluid, with various close associates on the edge who never joined formally and much overlapping with other societies in London and the provinces. During the thirty-odd years of its existence the active personnel inevitably altered as some removed and new blood came in. Thus about the time Priestley settled in Birmingham, Erasmus Darwin took off for Derby, too far away for continued attendance though he kept in touch by letter. In 1783 he wrote to Boulton:

> We have establish'd an infant philosophical society at Derby, but do not presume to compare it to your well-grown gigantic philosophers at Birmingham. Perhaps like the free-mason societies, we may sometimes make your society a visit, our number at present amounts to seven, and we meet hebdominally.[18]

At the formal inauguration, though he oddly avoided mention of a previous society at Derby, Darwin did speak of imitating other institutions and in particular of building up a learned library to keep them abreast of knowledge and to create 'a kind of band of Wampum, a chain of concord, which may hold our Society together'.[19] This library, which grew in time into an impressive collection, was heavily weighted from the start towards science and medicine. The medical flavour was explicable in that six out of seventeen early members (including Darwin and his son) belonged to the profession, and an even higher proportion of the non-resident members. But it was still a fairly catholic group that included leading tradesmen and industrialists — such as the younger Strutt of the hosiery firm and Duesbury the china manufacturer — plus a couple of clergymen and a former coach-painter who was paid to act as secretary. Under the chairmanship of the polymathic Darwin discussion must surely have been free-ranging, and notwithstanding the usual taboos on bringing up party politics or religion the Society was probably no place for out-and-out conservatives. In fact when a message of sympathy was sent to Joseph Priestley after the Birmingham riots of 1791, one member, a minister of the church, violently objected and the dispute became public.[20]

Something similar occurred at the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society over the same issue, only here the intended gesture of support was withdrawn after protest and it was several of the radicals who resigned. By then the Manchester Society had been active for ten years and was earning a deserved reputation for its published volumes of *Memoirs*.[21] It too owed much to Scottish and Dissenting (Unitarian and Quaker) precedents. Some of its keenest supporters were also behind the quite separate Manchester Academy, heir to the now defunct institution at Warrington. Ties with the Nonconformist intelligentsia of Liverpool remained close, and the Society itself grew out of a discussion circle at the house of Dr Thomas Percival, former student of both Warrington Academy and Edinburgh University. Another Warrington man, the Unitarian minister Thomas Barnes, offered the new foundation its first home at Cross Street Chapel. Yet while the prime-movers, not by chance, were mainly Dissenters, the Society's ethos was always determinedly non-denominational. Nor did there prove to be too much significance for its eventual composition or its range of interests in the fact that among the first two dozen members enrolled some 60% were physicians and surgeons associated with Manchester Infirmary. The medical element soon came to be diluted by an influx of manufacturers, lawyers, Anglican clergy, and others; and Law 8 of the constitution laid down quite firmly that the chairman must veto at once any talk about 'Practical Branches of Physic'. Topics of conversation had to be confined to 'Natural Philosophy, Theoretical and Experimental Chemistry, Polite Literature, Civil Law, General [though not British] Politics, Commerce [but presumably not members' own business

concerns], and the Arts'. This still left ample scope, as can be seen from the mixed fare printed in the *Memoirs*. The third volume, for example, published in 1790, contained articles on taxation, the plays of Philip Massinger, bills of mortality, the floating of cork on water, cretinism, Druidical remains near Halifax, eloquence, properties of geometric series, textile dyeing, and Greek and Roman painting. Polite knowledge and rational entertainment — or serious self-education and genuine research? It remains problematic. From a Utilitarian standpoint the achievements of the early years were small. The mechanics' college which the Society promoted in the 1780s turned out to be overambitious and failed after two years; and in spite of the encouragement given to the research of John Dalton and others, the technological spin-off at this stage was minimal. That however may be largely beside the point. At one of the initial meetings the Unitarian chemist Thomas Henry had spoken of the civilizing power of intellectual pursuits. Polite learning refined the understanding, humanized the soul, extended knowledge, and helped in procuring, as he put it, 'the comforts and accommodations of life'. A cultivated mind marked off the gentleman from the plebeian more effectively than dress or wealth or titles. Why then should the manufacturer and the merchant not reap these advantages, and the young businessman not devote himself to edifying literature, the microscope, and the wonders of electricity instead of the tavern, the gaming table, and the brothel? The aim was not to turn merchants into scholars but to help them acquire useful knowledge and the insignia of culture.[22]

Some weeks later this theme of self-improvement (so close to the contemporary German ideal of *Bildung*) was taken up by another speaker, Thomas Barnes. The truly educated man, he claimed,

> . . . borrows ideas, images, illustrations, from kindred sciences. His mind widens with increasing knowledge. He sees every subject, as it were, in a larger field of vision. He views it round, in a greater variety of aspects. His soul is expanded, his judgment strengthened, and all his powers assisted, and improved.[23]

The sincerity of such pronouncements need not be questioned. Mental stimulus, news of recent advances in knowledge, opportunities for trying out ideas, the enjoyable cut and thrust of debate, access to expensive resources like scientific instruments of a library, these were all benefits that society membership could offer over and above simple good fellowship. But for some there might be other advantages. Societies tended to be meritocratic; inside the group erudition and expertise counted for more than rank and religious affiliation. Leisured gentry, high-status professionals (e.g. physicians and barristers), well-beneficed clergy, and municipal dignatories mingled on the neutral territory of the society with artists, apothecaries, schoolmasters, and engineers; with Dissenters denied access to an Oxbridge education or public office; with self-made tradesmen and autodidact factory-owners. Few other local institutions were so promiscuous: Corporation, Church, fashionable assemblies, only emphasized divisions; theatre-going, concerts, pleasure gardens, and sporting occasions did not necessarily promote social mixing as the egalitarian 'lit. and phil'. actively did. Not only that, the coalition of classes, professions and trades *inside* the group must surely have paid off, as it did with the freemasons, in the dispensing of favour and in mutually profitable arrangements *outside* as well.

Intellectual reputations forged within the society became known to other interested groups across the country via the 'invisible college' of personal contacts, correspondence, and publications. What is far less certain is the extent to which these reputations impinged on the consciousness of fellow-citizens. The societies were after all essentially private bodies, even if a few — Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne, and the United Friars at Norwich — had achieved a certain public profile before the end of the century. Yet on this hinges the theory of social legitimization which has sometimes been advanced,[24] the hypothesis that socially

aspiring, 'marginal' classes like cultivated Dissenters and *nouveau riche* manufacturers could win prestige and wider acceptance through cultural means (notably by adopting the progressive ideology of science). On this view the societies, besides providing people of ambiguous status with a vehicle for self-expression, also handed them cultural passports into circles of power and influence. This is too complex an argument to enter fully here, for it raises questions about the value systems of urban élites, and about the relative weighting given to intellectual accomplishments in comparison with, say, polished manners, good breeding, conspicuous expenditure, or possession of a landed estate. Unlike the literary and scientific institutions of the later Georgian period with their prominent buildings, lecture courses, museums, and proceedings reported in the local press, their eighteenth-century predecessors were generally little advertised — and if little advertised then perhaps without much impact on the community at large. Their members' main concern was less public esteem than self-improvement and recognition by their peers.

Easy generalizations should be resisted though. These societies all had their own quirky individuality. Each one was shaped by its regional setting, its economic and social milieu, the head of cultural pressure that sustained it, and the motives of its chief performers. The arrival of a new society on the scene was unpredictable. Why is there no evidence of such a body in thriving Bristol, when its neighbour Bath, with a much smaller resident population, gave birth to two?[25] Was it the very different social structure or merely the lack of an efficient human catalyst such as Bath had in Edmund Rack? Ex-Norfolk draper, Quaker, and a diligent social climber, Rack found an opening for public spiritedness and personal advancement in establishing at Bath an equivalent of the premium-awarding Society of Arts. Even more than its London prototype the Bath institution (the future Bath and West) concentrated on agricultural improvement, setting up the first experimental farm in the country and from 1780 publishing a series of *Letters and Papers* on good husbandry. If somewhat peripheral to Bath itself, it gave Rack, its originator and first secretary, undoubted local prestige; so that he was immediately turned to for help in starting a Philosophical Society late in 1779. Joseph Priestley, living then in Wiltshire and already a Vice-President of the Agricultural Society, may have been a source of inspiration here. Alternatively it may have been sparked off by a series of subscription lectures being given by John Arden, a well-known science popularizer resident in Bath, who like Priestley willingly joined the new Society. The actual initiative though came from Thomas Curtis, a governor of the Hospital, who with Rack went round drumming up support. 'As this Society is to be quite select', Rack noted in his journal, 'we admit none but Men of known abilities & Learning in the various branches of science — Myself and Wm Matthews excepted. We join it to learn wisdom; and it promises to furnish much'.[26] (Matthews, a fellow Quaker, ran a brewery and coalyard, and later a farmers' supply business, eventually succeeding Rack as secretary to the Agricultural Society.) A fortnight later, when the membership reached eighteen (out of the twenty-five permitted) and it had been decided that future admissions must be by unanimous ballot, Rack recorded that the 'institution begins to make some noise in the City; and "many will strive to enter in but shall not be able" '[27] — a rare contemporary indication that, at least in a place like Bath, envious credit *was* to be had from society membership. But it was no stuffy set of individuals anyway. Half a dozen were physicians and surgeons, among them the philanthropic J. C. Lettsom, another Quaker, who like several others was a Fellow of the Royal Society. The presence of an Anglican clergyman and at least a couple of Methodists (including the eminent natural historian John Walcott) showed the lack of religious bias. Two or three members were in trade, one of whom, a linen draper, owned a powerful electrical apparatus. Among the rest — apart from Priestley and Arden — were James Collings (described by Rack as 'a Walking Library & the picture of Locke'), the humanitarian naturalist Mathew Martin, Lord Mulgrave (traveller, MP for Huntingdon, and a Lord of the Admiralty), and not least William Herschel,

who by then had given up his musical career for astronomy and who, among many other contributions to the Society, announced there his discovery of the planet Uranus.[28] However, the fact that the classical scholar William Melmoth only declined to join on health grounds is enough to show that the Bath Society encompassed more than the sciences, and in fact 'the Arts . . . the History of Nations or any Branch of Polite Literature' were all stated to be admissable subjects in their search for 'truth' and mental improvement. And for some even the scientific discussions had a moral or religious purpose in the long run; certainly for Rack, himself an amateur naturalist, as his journal makes abundantly clear.[29]

The vitality of the Bath Society, at least in its earlier years (it survived until 1787 and was briefly revived in the late 1790s), awoke no response in Bristol, which lacked an intellectual focus other than its Library Society until the very end of the century, when a somewhat radical circle did form round Thomas Beddoes and his quasi-medical Pneumatic Institution.[30] By that stage not only Bath but Exeter too, to take another West Country example, had known an active society, the latter publishing a very respectable volume of *Essays* in 1796.[31]

East of the Pennines the Leeds and Newcastle societies deserve mention. Evidence of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, founded in 1783 'for promoting Natural Knowledge', is scanty, though it comprised some thirty members and owned a collection of scientific instruments made by a local craftsman.[32] Its president and an old friend of Joseph Priestley was William Hey, senior surgeon at the Leeds Infirmary, who had previously helped to run a medical club in the town. In spite of Hey's enthusiasm and the promising list of members the group seems not to have survived for more than three or four years; though, as the textile manufacturer Benjamin Gott later recalled,[33] there were twenty to thirty cultivated, classically-educated families living in Leeds who set the cultural tone and might have been expected to rally round the Society, as happened at Newcastle.

The Literary and Philosophical Society at Newcastle[34] had several precursors of sorts, including a debating club in which the young schoolmaster Thomas Spence, already notorious for his advanced views on the rights of man and the nationalization of land, was a prominent member. In the event the plan for the new institution came from the Unitarian minister William Turner, another old boy of Warrington Academy, who circulated his proposals in 1793. More than any other such programme before 1800 this emphasized practical field studies: into coal and lead mining, regional antiquities (such as the Roman Wall), commerce, farming, and the size and occupations of the urban population. Once launched the Society took up several of these suggestions, and while non-utilitarian matters were not wholly neglected, what dominated the papers discussed were the mining industry, agricultural improvement, science, maritime affairs, and the state of society. A supervised library and a small museum exhibiting geological strata and minerals had been established by 1796,[35] and some years later, no doubt influenced by the new Royal Institution in London, William Turner became permanent lecturer in a properly funded (and equipped) post with the objective of teaching young people the rudiments of science and technology, of providing refresher courses for the better-informed, and of supplying 'an agreeable and instructive source of entertainment to persons of all ages and of each sex'. In due course the Society also promoted a monitorial school for the Newcastle poor. All this begins to anticipate developments in the late Georgian period, when the major new literary and scientific institutions were established, the mechanics' institute movement got under way, and London University came into existence under Benthamite auspices. Upper-middle-class self-improvement would henceforth become more and more entangled with efforts to bring education to the rest of the population, whether out of pure altruism, or to stem national decline, or for more suspect reasons of social control. After the revolutionary alarums of the 1790s old-fashioned Enlightenment attitudes came under progressive strain.

They were unmistakably at the heart of several Norwich societies, however, including one worth special consideration here, the Society of United Friars, instituted in 1785 and surviving into the 1820s.[36] The Society's title, together with its members' relish for initiation ceremonies, for dressing up in monastic costume, and for dubbing their officers 'Abbot', 'Prior', and the like, could easily be misconstrued, for in practice the group was entirely secular, scarcely masonic, and quite rational. The fancy dress was partly a levelling device to put a rather heterogeneous membership on an equal social footing, partly a constant reminder to them that the religious orders had a long tradition of cherishing knowledge and practising charity. In their own case they made it plain that they would emphasize 'decent Mirth in lieu . . . of austere Rules' and shun every form of 'Bigotry, Enthusiasm [i.e. fanaticism], and Superstition'.[37] In reality their 'chapters' and 'conclaves' somewhat resembled the meetings of other self-improvement societies, with discussion papers, philosophical debates, readings from learned journals, and communications from honorary members and correspondents. Frequently their deliberations took a practical turn as they addressed local issues like preventing horse-stealing, the Norwich water supply, agricultural progress, the state of the poor, or methods of sea rescue off the treacherous Norfolk coast. As a body they set up a charity for the widows and orphans of local tradesmen, and in hard winters they organized soup kitchens for the needy. They supported the abolition of slavery, condemned the boy chimney-sweep abuse, agreed (in May 1791) that the measures taken by the French Revolutionary Assembley were justified, and argued that social inequalities at home could and should be reduced. In less *engagé* sessions they considered the nature of genius, or physiognomy, or the Spanish conquest of America, or comets, or ancient sculpture. Science was a perennial interest. According to one account they soon got together a library, a large map collection, and 'many very curious models and capital instruments for making philosophical [i.e. scientific] experiments'.[38] In many respects the United Friars fulfilled the ideal of a private gentleman's society in the eighteenth-century mode. Never had he left a meeting without a sense of personal improvement, one member wrote to the Society when ill-health forced his resignation: 'Let me add that many of the happiest hours of my life I place to their acct.'.[39]

Various interpretations of the 'lit. and phil.' phenomenon have been proposed, mostly from the 'phil.' (or progress-of-science) angle, sometimes without due regard to differences in local contexts, and hardly ever recognizing the discontinuity of the years around 1800 when the Royal Institution set an alternative model and standard.[40] Some time ago Roy Porter spoke out against viewing the societies primarily as heralds of the redbrick universities or, to use his words, 'within the utilitarianism of industrialization, or the ethic of Dissent'; for him they had more to do with rising provincial consciousness, the snob value of adopting metropolitan culture, and the fine-tuning of social relationships in class-conscious communities.[41] In fact all these things probably paid some part. But if they were necessary agents in the pooling of ideas and the flow of information, they were only *one* of the channels available, and the messages were extremely various, only intermittently scientific, and seldom very technological. They *did* award acceptable badges of culture, but then so did concert-going, picture-collecting, and even tea-parties. Of course the institutions of London provided imitable models, but not to the exclusion of Edinburgh, Warrington, and conceivably Philadelphia. Perhaps, as Roy Porter has also suggested, they were the fine achievement of provincial élites attempting 'to bring Enlightenment to their own doorsteps'.[42] Personally I put the notion of 'self-improvement' somewhere at the core, but no one-dimensional interpretation is ever going to suffice for these intriguing, multi-purpose, very Georgian organizations.

REFERENCES

1. The present article is not concerned directly with Scotland, for which see D. D. McElroy, 'The Literary Clubs and Societies of Eighteenth-Century Scotland' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1952).

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6. The historiographical background is discussed in D. C. Douglas, *English Scholars, 1660–1730*, 2nd edn. (London, 1951). For the archaeological side see S. Piggott, *William Stukeley* (Oxford, 1950), pp. xii, 3–7, and passim.

7. D. E. Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain* (London, 1976), p. 12.

8. S. Piggott, op. cit., pp. 139–40. Stukeley had tried to get a similar society going at Ancaster, near Grantham, without success.

9. Timothy Neve to Little Brown, 23 July 1741, quoted in J. Nichols, Lit.Anec., op. cit., pp. 136–38.

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11. *Gentleman's Magazine*, 56 (July, 1786), p. 560.

12. The standard work is D. Hudson and K. W. Luckhurst, *The Royal Society of Arts, 1754–1954* (London, 1954).

13. See H. McLachlan, *Warrington Academy* (Manchester, Chetham Society, n.s. 107, 1943).

14. For this Liverpool circle see E. Meteyard, *The Life of Josiah Wedgwood*, 1 (London, 1865–66), pp. 301–11, 482–84.

15. R. E. Schofield, *The Lunar Society of Birmingham* (Oxford, 1963).

16. R. L. Edgeworth, *Memoirs . . . concluded by . . . Maria Edgeworth*, 1 (London, 1821), pp. 183–84.

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18. Erasmus Darwin to Matthew Boulton, 4 March 1783, quoted in R. P. Sturges, 'Cultural Life in Derby in the Late Eighteenth Century' (Unpub. MA thesis, University of Loughborough, 1968), fol. 50. See also A. E. Musson and E. Robinson, *Science and Technology in the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester, 1969), chapter 4, which cites Darwin's letter apologizing for missing a Lunar Society meeting: 'Lord! what inventions, what wit, what rhetoric, metaphysical, mechanical, & pyrotechnical, will be on wing, bandy'd like a shuttlecock from one to another of your troop of philosophers!'.

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35. C. Hatchett, *The Hatchett Diary*, ed. A. Raistrick (Truro, 1967), p. 79.
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37. 'Exordium to the Rules and Orders, 1785', in 'Transactions 15 Nov 1785–11 Nov 1794' of the Society of United Friars (Norfolk Record Office).
38. *Norwich Mercury*, 4 April 1789 in which 'Jubal' replies to a previous correspondent who had suggested that science lectures should be given in the city. It is apparent from Jubal's remarks that the United Friars were little known in Norwich at this date, though their charitable activities soon brought them more into public notice.
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