Drinking and Thinking: Club Life and Convivial Sociability in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh

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Abstract. An intriguing historical feature of the Scottish Enlightenment is the blend of philosophical and drinking clubs to which leading thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith belonged. Two leading clubs of the period, the Select Society and the Poker Club, are the primary focus of this essay; the clubs provided members with dramatically different types of social experience. For the Select, it was a space for formal debate of topical issues, while the Poker offered a venue for convivial sociability. This essay examines the significant intersections of polite culture and convivial enjoyment occurring in Edinburgh club life, in order to analyze the active negotiation of boundaries between polite and popular tastes. Of particular interest is how that negotiation was played out in the "drinking and thinking" lives of some of polite culture's most eloquent arbiters.

1. Club Life In Mid-century Edinburgh

The intellectual history of mid-eighteenth-century Edinburgh is typically written with liberal use of superlative terms; the Scottish capital has often been depicted as an "Athens of the North" due to its abundance of influential thinkers.[1] Indeed, along with its legion of eminent literati, Edinburgh also hosted many of the clubs which Peter Clark has described as a "complex constellation of associations which enlightened the British social firmament during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."[2] Scottish clubs in particular have frequently been singled out for the relevant social, cultural, and political roles and influence they maintained during the period, with the mid-century clubs of literati being most often mentioned in historical accounts.[3] The varying practices of two clubs of significance, the Poker Club and the Select Society, will be examined here for comparison of their attitudes and relationship towards alcohol consumption, with special attention paid to alcohol's role in national identity-formation.

Of club life during the eighteenth century, Clark has suggested that "there may have been up to 25,000 different clubs and societies meeting in the English-speaking world… [and] over 130 different types of society operating in the British Isles."[4] The impact of club life on urban centers (especially

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London) has been well-recorded in contemporary historical research, as have Scotland's numerous clubs and organizations. Clark comments that "Georgian Edinburgh became a brilliant centre of associational life, adorned by famous literary and learned societies such as the Select Society and the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh,"[5] and these groups have received more than sufficient historical attention. However, while many other Scottish clubs have been examined as possible sites of nationalist resistance, few historians or critics have considered the subversive potential of mid-century clubs like the Poker.[6] Many social histories tend to collapse all clubs from the mid-century into a single overriding example of "improvement" through civic association; unfortunately, this approach obscures core differences that separated and distinguished clubs like the Poker and the Select Society, groups which shared members but not ideologies.[7]

A key difference can be discerned in the clubs' perceptions and practice of sociability; as Phil Withington has noted, "just as early modern people had their own understandings about familial structure, economic exchange and social differentiation, so they had a very clear sense of sociability as a distinct social practice."[8] Sociability naturally took different forms when practiced by different groups in different settings, and this is particularly the case with the Poker and the Select Society. This can be witnessed in the contemporary account of the clubs by James Boswell, a member of the Select Society who was not selected to join the Poker. In a journal entry for July 13, 1763, he recorded his disappointment and disapproval of the former group. "I must find one fault with all the Poker Club, as they are called," he wrote. "They are doing all that they can to destroy politeness. They would abolish all respect due to rank and external circumstance."[9]

Ever conscious of his place in the social hierarchy, Boswell recoiled at the rude behavior of the Poker Club, finding its exclusivity no marker of gentility. He also recorded in the same entry his wounded pride – "I own I would rather want their instructive conversation than be hurt by their rudeness" – and concluded that only when the Poker's company was "qualified by the presence of a stranger" was the club worthwhile.[10] It is instructive to inquire into what exactly made the Poker Club such a different social experience than the Select Society. Made up largely of disenchanted Select Society members, the Poker Club was even more "select" than its predecessor and its purpose even more focused. A primary goal shared by both clubs was to argue the case for a Scottish militia, but the Poker's apparent lack of "all respect due to rank and external circumstances" distinguished it from the Select Society. A look at the Poker's membership rolls confirms Richard Sher's observation that the Poker's "mixture of gentry (and some nobility) with men of letters and of 'the Liberal Professions'… was unusual."[11] Another core difference can be noticed in the Poker's valuation of convivial sociability. Following a cultural and social model based on convivial sociability, the Poker broke from the Select Society's admitted elitism in order to approach the matter of the Scottish

militia in a differing context and style. For Boswell, this made the club fundamentally opposed to the Select Society; he complained in his journal that the Poker Club "would live like a kind of literary barbarians."[12]

A member of both groups, David Hume confirmed Boswell's assessment of the Poker's "barbarian" tendencies when he wrote to Adam Ferguson in 1763 that he "really wish[ed] often for the plain roughness of the Poker."[13] In contrast to Boswell and the Select Society, Hume regarded the Poker as a more effective club better able to discuss and potentially resolve common concerns. Careful examination of both clubs reveals that "plain roughness" was a key element in the social experience offered to members of the Poker Club; it was manifested in convivial sociability, as well as instigated and sustained by alcohol consumption. The Select Society thus found its functional antithesis in the Poker, where many of the same men worked to resolve the same problems by means of a wholly different means and style of sociability. Allowed and allowing themselves to drink and think, the Poker Club members created an opportunity for the intimate exchange of ideas and strategies, conflating work and pleasure, excess and intellect.

2. THEORIES OF CONSUMPTION

Despite its renown for intellectual and scholastic achievement, the world of mid-century Edinburgh often borrowed more from the model of symposium than trivium and quadrivium. Convivial to its core, the divided city of Old and New Edinburgh was typically united only by a shared enthusiasm for the pleasures of the bottle. As Roy Porter has argued, "the Georgian age prized heavy-drinking as a manly and sociable custom."[14] For mid-century Scots such patterns of excessive alcoholic consumption were not unusual and can be attributed to a number of well-recognized social and historical factors. Peter Clark has claimed in *The English Alehouse* that "the growth of business drinking also owed something to rising conspicuous consumption in post-Restoration society,"[15] and Judith Hunter has suggested that "there was little concern for disorderly behaviour or excessive eating and drinking at the clubs and other establishments frequented by the upper and middle classes."[16] In fact, Jessica Warner has highlighted the link between excessive drinking and eating, where historically "excessive drinking [has been labeled] as a mere subset of excessive eating."[17] The meta-narrative of alcoholism had yet to acquire an active role in regulating and policing patterns of consumption, thereby leaving convivial sociability open to all types and manners of social application.

As will be explained, the most visible form of Scottish social life at the time – club life – often literally used alcohol consumption as a key agent in both club formation and political propaganda. This unusual fact about mid-eighteenth-century Edinburgh, elided in many histories of the period, deserves further consideration in the historical and critical discourses of British intellectual history. That said, drinking practices in eighteenth-century Scotland have been not been ignored in social histories of the period by any measure.[18]

In "The Drinking Man's Disease," Porter has remarked of excessive alcohol consumption during the eighteenth century that "if England was bad, Scotland was much worse."[19] National stereotyping as it relates to alcohol consumption has undoubtedly contributed to the "legend of drunken Scotland," perceptively analyzed by Daniel Paton.[20] Like the Irish, Scots have been frequently depicted as excessive consumers of alcohol, especially distilled spirits. As a marker of national identity, the "drunken Scot" has had as much staying power as tartans and shortbread tins.

Several realities of eighteenth-century Scottish life refute this stereotypical view, most notably as it relates to alcohol's availability and consumption patterns. Porter has noted that for many people of the time, alcohol was a safer choice to drink than water; he states that "given the impure nature of the water supply, fermented beverages formed safe as well as warming, nourishing and convivial drinks."[21] Add to this the social dimension of convivial sociability, where excessive consumption of alcohol was often regarded as an affirmative act of belonging to groups and nations. In his introduction to *Drinking Cultures*, Thomas Wilson argues that drinking is "an act of identification, of differentiation and integration, and of the projection of homogeneity and heterogeneity, particularly in social arenas of ethnicity and national identity."[22] This nationalist function operated not only in Scotland but in England as well; referring to the "beefsteak" emblematized and celebrated by English clubs and citizens, Porter claims that "rhythms of work and rituals of sociability centered on celebrations that symbolically linked cheer, conviviality and community… Beefsteak became the national emblem for Englishmen whose manhood seemingly hinged upon being three-bottle fellows."[23]

Along with these historical factors one must also include pre-temperance views of consumption, derived and endorsed by many ancient and medieval practices. In fact, Mariana Valverde states in *Diseases of the Will* that

> Christianity regarded the pleasures of consumption as problematic only if linked to sinful desires; feelings were not very important. The Greeks in turn emphasized neither desires nor feelings, focusing rather on the aesthetic proportions of the conduct in question: excessive indulgence in eating, drinking and sex was for them problematic if connected to lack of harmony and balance.[24]

Perceptions and practices of excessive consumption certainly changed throughout the eighteenth century, but those changes were largely effected by specific historical events that can be linked to emergent, not nascent temperance ideologies.

3. Sites Of Consumption

Many changes in the perception of excessive alcohol consumption can be tied to new sites for consumption of alternative beverages, most notably coffee. Brian Cowman's work has recently demonstrated how intermeshed the social world of the coffeehouse was with specific political ideologies, casting doubt

on the Habermasian notions of the coffeehouse as an emergent sphere of civic discourse. In fact, Cowman has argued in "The Rise of the Coffeehouse Reconsidered" that "in most cases, the coffeehouses of London fit smoothly into the various layers of ward, parish and vestry, civic community, and state governments."[25] While this political function varied after the Restoration, coffee houses served important social roles for consumers, providing them with "a new social beverage which could be drunk in public settings in a manner akin to alcoholic beverages like ales, beers, or wines, but it could be consumed without fear of consequent intoxication."[26] The popular influence of this new beverage cannot be underestimated during the eighteenth century, but coffee did not ultimately supplant or replace alcoholic drinks in creating and sustaining forms of convivial sociability.

A key reason for this has to do with the relationship between traditional sites for business and social transactions and alcohol consumption. As Peter Clark has explained, these traditional sites included

> inns, usually large, fashionable establishments offering wine, ale and beer, together with quite elaborate food and lodging to well-heeled travelers; taverns, selling wine to the more prosperous, but without the extensive accommodation of inns; and alehouses, normally smaller premises serving ale or beer (and later spirits) and providing rather basic food and accommodation for the lower orders.[27]

Beat Klumin and B. Ann Tlusty note that "the common denominator of all these institutions is the regular sale of alcohol for consumption on publicly accessible premises."[28] In each case, alcohol consumption is not simply incidental for business and personal transactions but is, in fact, the occasion for them.

Phil Withington underscores this point by remarking that "informal types of company, whether habitual or occasional, were often associated with institutional settings designed for sociability."[29] Whether in inns, taverns, or alehouses, groups expected to be provided with the occasion (and license) for convivial sociability. In the early eighteenth century, this expectation may have been influenced by Royalist practices from the previous century; Angela McShane-Jones claims that "drinking in company (and the singing that inevitably entailed) became an important part of the political culture of the royalist."[30] In her article "Before There Was 'Alcoholism,'" Jessica Warner elaborates on the transformation of Royalist drinking culture in the Restoration era, noting that it is distinguished by "its essentially recreational nature, characterized by an exclusion of wives and children and by a shift in locus from the home to the alehouse or tavern."[31] This process intensified in the early eighteenth century due to an increase in the number and types of commercial business transacted in inns, taverns, and alehouses.

Clark claims that "drinking houses became the principal forum of mercantile activity in the eighteenth century," with all three venues serving a different customer base.[32] He suggests that "taverns, like inns, were places for business to be done; investments arranged, lawyers and physicians consulted," while

also noting that in alehouses, "all kinds of business were conducted within its walls, from consultations with an attorney to negotiations over renting a house."[33] Inns, taverns, and alehouses may have retained their traditional social stratifications in terms of clientele, yet they enjoyed mutual success as sites for convivial sociability by providing the means and occasion for multiple kinds of social transactions. Indeed, once business transactions became predominantly located in inns, taverns, and alehouses, one might say that the creation of publically-accessible sites for convivial sociability was complete.

It was inevitable that club life would become situated within this new public space. Also primarily male and convivial in origins, eighteenth-century clubs were located in these sites as early as the beginnings of the seventeenth century, with the famous Tribe of Ben located at the Mermaid Tavern among many notable examples. Clark has suggested that "the drinking house was at the heart of the social world of pre-modern Europe," and the same might be said of early to mid-eighteenth century Britain.[34] Clark's definition of clubs further highlights the importance of the "drinking house" for club definition and organization. According to Clark, clubs were primarily "private associations, overwhelmingly male, meeting on a regular, organized basis, mostly in public drinking-places, where they combined a common sociability with a more specific purpose, whether recreational, locational, educational, political, philanthropic, or whatever."[35]

John Chartres further affirms that "nine out of ten clubs before 1800 met in drink outlets, and it was only in the last quarter of the century, as with assembly rooms and other more formalized places of association, that dedicated premises came gradually to displace the multi-purpose inn."[36] Until that time, various clubs met in public places like inns, taverns, and alehouses, for the purpose of convivial sociability conducted under the auspices of socially-licensed alcohol consumption. This was a vital component of club life, and perhaps of most associational sociability from the period; as Porter has remarked of the eighteenth century, "the consumption of alcohol was the index that constituted a social gathering."[37]

4. Drunkenness Vs. Alcoholism In The Eighteenth Century

The nature of alcohol consumption in such public sites has been a hotly-debated issue in histories of the period, as well as in scholarly research on alcohol and drug history. Excessive alcohol consumption during the eighteenth century has prompted many studies which have sought to locate and identify the emergence of the "disease concept" of alcoholism.[38] As Roy Porter has shown, this concept can be traced to the eighteenth century, when many "practitioners not only saw drunkenness as a cause of disease, but regarded it as, in its own right, an addictive disorder, even a disease."[39] However, he also notes that while "disease language was quite commonly applied to the condition throughout the eighteenth century," the perception and usage of terms like "disease" and "addiction" have varied widely according to place and time.[40]

In fact, Jessica Warner claims that while "the noun 'disease' appears to have had a fairly constant meaning over the past several centuries… 'addiction' meant many things in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century usage, and did not necessarily imply a loss of control over one's behavior."[41]

Distinguishing between contemporary notions of addiction and those found in the eighteenth century is essential for better understanding patterns of alcohol consumption during the period. Robin Room argues that **"**the addiction concept emerges as a way of understanding… the failure of the drinker or drug user to behave rationally (from the perspective of the observer), the failure to stop a recurrent pattern of use despite the harm it is seen as causing."[42] Accounting for such apparent irrationality, according to Room, is "at the heart of addiction concepts: the loss of control, or, in recent formulations, impairment of control."[43] By isolating "loss of control" as a symptomatic behavior associated with alcoholism, theorists and practitioners have put "the affliction into the territory of physicians and health, and in our culture this in itself automatically involves a strong privileging of the biological."[44] Valverde claims that "alcoholism, as a construct and as an experience, is rooted in the perceived opposition between one's willpower and one's desires or inner urges," contending in fact that "the medicalization of alcoholism was not inevitable, and that it was neither complete nor consistent even when it did take place."[45]

A trajectory can be detected between social perceptions of drunkenness and emerging medico-legal definitions of "diseased" or "addicted" drunkards. In "Drunkenness and Responsibility for Crime in the Eighteenth Century," Dana Rabin has demonstrated how class differences impacted such emerging legal definitions. Rabin writes that

> drunkenness among the wealthy was often described as a private vice, while drunkenness and addiction to alcohol among the laboring poor were said to pose "political mischiefs" that increased crime and threatened to break down gender roles and the structure of the family.[46]

However, when brought to trial, poor defendants increasingly appealed to excessive alcohol consumption as a reason for their actions, pleading in effect a defense of "diminished responsibility." This defense relied upon the idea that "alcohol could devastate a person's judgment and erode one's sense of responsibility," even (and especially) in the eyes of the law.[47]

Counter to this legal conception of drunkenness was "the image of a drunken man, [who] while not always attractive or appealing, would have seemed consistent with contemporary conceptions of honor and masculinity, which often celebrated the heavy drinker."[48] Explaining and justifying this apparent paradox posed a real problem for social conservatives like Henry Fielding, whose views reflected the mid-century perceptual gulf separating well-to-do heavy drinkers and poor "drunkards":

> Fielding's insistence that "the upper part of life is distinguished from the lower"… implied that immorality among the rich was out of the reach of legal authorities while the same behavior among the poor presented a serious threat to

public order that necessitated strict regulation and discipline.[49]

Thus, the class divide may be seen to have inadvertently promoted the ensuing medicalization of drunkenness into the "disease" of alcoholism by ushering in the social and legal ramifications of individual agency. This marked a significant shift from earlier perceptions of drunkenness, particularly in the seventeenth century. According to Rabin, "seventeenth-century murder pamphlets depicted drunkenness as a sin that signaled a criminal fate, threatened the social order, and demanded the most severe punishment. By the eighteenth century, commentators described gradations of responsibility for drunkenness."[50]

Unlike temperance ideology of the nineteenth century, eighteenth-century perceptions of alcohol consumption (particularly drunkenness) often allowed for an ambivalent understanding of its properties**,** including its social benefits along with awareness of its potential for abuse. This can be seen in the writing of contemporary physicians like Benjamin Rush, whose work has been regarded as laying the foundation for the "disease" concept of alcoholism. In his essay "The Effects of Ardent Spirits," Rush claims that drinking "fermented spirits" can in fact be healthful:

> Fermented liquors contain so little spirit, and that so intimately combined with other matters, that they can seldom be drunken in sufficient quantities to produce intoxication and its subsequent effects without exciting a disrelish to their taste, or pain, from their distending the stomach… [and] often have a friendly influence upon health and life.[51]

According to Rush, it is the abuse of "ardent spirits" that invites disease and disaster – "poverty and misery, crimes and infamy, diseases and death, are all the natural and usual consequences of the intemperate use of ardent spirits" – as well as animalistic drunkenness.[52] Rush's view of such drunken metamorphoses is positively Ovidian: "the body and mind of a man by a fit of drunkenness… in folly causes him to resemble a calf – in stupidity, an ass – in roaring, a mad bull – in quarrelling and fighting, a dog – in cruelty, a tiger – in fetor, a skunk – in filthiness, a hog – and in obscenity, a he-goat."[53]

The connection between such views of drunkenness and the early to mid-century "Gin Craze" has been well-documented in several recent studies, as have the links between class, commerce, and temperance ideology during this period.[54] Nevertheless, it is worth reiterating a key element of the "Gin Craze" debate that focuses on varying perceptions of drunkenness at the time. Jessica Warner argues that "in the case of the gin craze, concerns over drunkenness bore very little correspondence to actual consumption, begging the question of whether a reforming elite was reacting to gin per se or rather to larger and more intractable threats to their society and way of life."[55] Porter supports this view by suggesting that "drunkenness was typically treated as a problem which was individual, local, and temporary, confined to times of feast and festivities, rather than a real threat to social survival itself."[56]

The "Gin Craze" exemplifies the ideological struggle waged over control of the poor, with the concomitant desire for the retention of heavy drinking practices among privileged classes. In many respects, the medicalization of drunkenness can be regarded as the outcome of this high-pitched debate. As Porter puts it, although the dispute over drunkenness was nothing new, the tactics were becoming more overtly official, buttressed by the church, state, and medical community: "what was new was not the concept of the chronic drunkard, but the strategies for dealing with the beast."[57]

4. THE RATIONAL WORLD OF THE SELECT SOCIETY

The relevance of this debate to mid-century Edinburgh clubs becomes clearer when one examines the social and cultural functions of groups like the Select Society and the Poker Club. Both were associational groups, per Clark's definition which stresses

> the importance of participation without financial or coercive pressures; the intermittent (albeit regular) meetings; the restricted functions of individual associations, usually having only one or two formal objectives; the informal or limited nature of the organization; and the quasi-private character of such bodies, with a general absence of a regulatory role.[58]

Such voluntary associations were common in mid-century Edinburgh, which according to Clark had "200 or more societies functioning in the late eighteenth century, and at least forty different varieties."[59] Most prominent among these clubs were debate societies like the Select Society, "whose meetings attracted a clientele of lawyers and landowners and discussed a broad set of economic and political issues."[60]

The Select Society was formed in 1754 by the painter Allan Ramsay, son of the poet.[61] The Select Society was initially a "discussion club" formed in the manner of such societies as the Philosophical, the Pantheon, and the Robinhood. Debate societies were formed in the capital and the provinces to discuss matters of importance to their members, often with open admission for the public to attend debate sessions. As Clark remarks, "public debating had become a popular rational entertainment, and some of the venues were run on a largely commercial basis."[62] Unlike such societies as the Pantheon and the Robinhood, the Select has been described as a "debating club for gifted and socially prominent members of the city's social elite."[63] From its inception, the society was above all meant to be purposeful for its select members. This directive is reflected in the society's structure and method of debate. Six "presidents" were elected to officiate over the debates, which were in turn moderated by a "questions committee," elected annually to approve questions submitted by members.[64] The structure of meetings was highly regulated and formal; members in attendance read prepared speeches or gave extempore reactions to questions at the start of the debate, which was then opened to the whole group for discussion.

During its heyday, when the Select Society felt the need to enforce a one-hundred member cap, a debate must have been quite a performance to witness. Roger Emerson notes that the subjects for debate covered "a wide range of issues, which touched on art, literature, eloquence, the theatre, economics, politics and public policy, manners, and national improvement."[65] The only prohibited subjects were those that "regard Revealed Religion, or which may give occasion to vent any Principles of Jacobitism," as stated in the society's rules and orders.[66] It was not until "the 1780s and early 1790s [that] debates on political issues were frequent" in such debate societies.[67] In lieu of openly political discussion, members such as David Hume might find their own essays being debated and could join in if they pleased.[68] The most-discussed topic in the club, however, was the formation of a Scottish Militia; between 1755 and 1756, it was debated in the Select Society six times.[69] Despite its apparently "political" nature, the debate over the Scottish Militia question was expressly nationalist and non-Jacobitical.

Post Union, a significant trend in non-Jacobitical Scottish nationalism derived from the non-partisan push for a Scottish militia. Early in the century, one of the Union's most vocal opponents and pro-militia advocates, Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, had looked back to the Lacedemonians for historical precedent: he praised that they "continued eight hundred years free, and in great honour, because they had a good militia."[70] Before helping to form the Poker Club, Adam Ferguson wrote in 1756 (the year of the Select Society's most intense discussion of the issue) that "a few Banditti from the Mountains, trained by their Situation to a warlike Disposition, might over-run the Country, and, in a Critical Time, give Law to this Nation."[71] As noted by Fania Oz-Salzberger, "more than any other thinker of the Scottish Enlightenment, Ferguson was to insist on military valour as a corner-stone of civic virtue."[72] This drive for a Scottish militia coalesced with other key aims of mid-century Edinburgh literati, particularly those that sought to offer self-improvement vis-à-vis organized sociability.

For the members of the Select Society, promotion of such aims involved highly-structured pathways to improvements, resulting eventually in the group's tripartite division. If the aim of any militia is to substitute individual citizens for trained soldiers in a standing army, the focus on improvement makes sense. To the extent that the Select Society was designed to participate in such a formation, it was most likely to be seen through its influence on its members, both actual and speculative. During the intense mid-century relations between Scotland and England, Scots competed strenuously with their southern neighbors for employment, preferment, money, and respect; in this matter of a Scottish militia, they were no different.[73] Scots' desire to contribute to their own defense (and that of Britain) signified their acceptance within a nation that stigmatized and fundamentally alienated them from its political process.

The key difference between this group and the later Poker Club has to do

with its formal character, found in organizational and procedural principles, as well as its method of rational debate. The society's pragmatic bent had led to its sponsorship of two splinter groups, the Edinburgh Society for the Encouragement of Arts (created in 1755) and the Select Society for Promoting the Reading and Speaking of the English Language in Scotland (existing from 1761-64).[74] This latter group has acquired considerable notoriety in social histories of the period, seen by many critics as either a leading cause or symptom of the Scottish pathology of paradox for its promotion of linguistic assimilation.[75] The former group had a noticeable impact on the improvement of Scottish manufacturing. Emerson notes that

> between 1755 and 1764 the society advertised 1,111 premiums for such items as rugs, clover seed, beer, new looms, and good stallions, as well as finely printed and bound books. In 1759, probably its best year, the society offered 141 prizes worth about £590.[76]

The Select Society for the Reading and Speaking of English also made practical inroads in promoting its objective of recruiting teachers "duly qualified to instruct gentlemen in the knowledge of the English tongue"; the famous series of elocution lectures by Thomas Sheridan, the playwright's father, in Edinburgh resulted from the desire expressed by this branch of the Select Society.[77]

However, these multiple purposes and aims of the Select Society led to its eventual demise and to the formation of the Poker Club. The Select Society's preoccupation with the sublime and mundane stimulated some and irritated others. As one of the judges of the Edinburgh Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Hume found such materialism bracing. Writing to Ramsay, he praised that the group had not "neglected porter, strong ale, and wrought ruffles, even down to linen rags."[78] For his part, Ramsay eventually withdrew from the Select Society to pursue a lucrative, successful career as painter to the King.[79] The third wave of recruits to the Select Society included Boswell, whose membership occurred near the end, rather than the zenith, of the Select Society. The defection of the intellectual nucleus of the Select – David Hume, Adam Smith, and Alexander Carlyle, among others – to the Poker indicates a genuine dissatisfaction with the former's methodological approach. Emerson aptly describes this shift in mid-century Edinburgh club life: "Select Society members tended to continue their club life in smaller, exclusive groups, such as the Poker Club, which were given to discussing serious, improving matters in convivial circumstances."[80] The return of "convivial circumstances" is worth stressing; while its goal did not fundamentally differ from the Select Society, the Poker sought to recast the debate and seek resolution through alternative means. In place of formal debate, the Poker Club offered members a space to drink and think.

5. Drinking And Thinking

Living like a "literary barbarian" in the Poker meant eschewing the Select Society's rule-bound procedures and searching for an alternative solution not guided or inspired by formal debate. Such practical distinctions illustrate the major perceptual division in the clubs' shared purposes. The type of drinking found in the Poker Club environment was perceived as supplementary and hortatory, while for the Select Society, such drinking ran counter to the display of individual facility and talent that the group was devised to highlight. The Poker represented a peculiar junction in Scottish clubs of the period, providing members with a single forum to enjoy previously incongruent forms of club activity: rational debate and convivial sociability. For Benjamin Rush, drinking that led to drunkenness prevented the exercise of the mind; he claimed that ardent spirits "impair the memory, debilitate the understanding, and pervert the moral faculties."[81] The Scottish physician Thomas Trotter concurred, stating the consequences of "immoderate" alcohol consumption are "imbecility of intellect, erroneous judgment, violent emotions; and loss of sense and motion after the immoderate use of vinous liquors."[82] Trotter goes even further by suggesting that drunkenness is "a temporary madness… [and] in constitutions where there is a predisposition to insanity and idiotism, these diseases are apt to succeed in paroxysm."[83] Given such diagnoses by contemporary physicians, one may conclude that eighteenth-century views of drunkenness mirror those of the present day, particularly where the impairment of rational faculties and loss of individual control (and responsibility) are concerned.

However, such a conclusion oversimplifies the cultural significance of the drinking/thinking practice at the heart of the Poker Club. For Thomas Wilson, the cultural values and attitudes shared by drinkers can wield a powerful influence on their sense of unity and purpose; he claims that

> drinking alcohol is an extremely important feature in the production and reproduction of ethnic, national, class, gender and local community identities… In many societies, perhaps the majority, drinking alcohol is a key practice in the expression of identity, an element in the construction and dissemination of national and other cultures.[84]

For the members of the Poker Club, Scottish national identity served to bind their interests and confer associational alliances, while convivial sociability affirmed those connections in practice. As Wilson notes, "drink is one of the most noticeable, emotional and important ways in which people express and discuss their identities and cultures."[85]

Drinking served such a purpose in the Poker Club, facilitating discussion and sociability over the course of the meetings. Sher offers a brief account of a typical day in the life of the Poker:

> A shilling dinner was served at a little after two o'clock in the afternoon, and the meeting usually broke up by six, although the dinner hour was later moved to three, and summer meetings sometimes lasted until seven or eight. Sherry and claret were the beverages of choice.[86]

The Poker's choice of claret is interesting, given that claret had become as distinctly Scottish a drink as Scotch whisky. Charles C. Luddington has in fact claimed that "whether it was consumed by active or passive Jacobites, Unionists or anti-Unionists, Tories or Whigs, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, or Catholics, claret represented something far more than a familiar taste: it represented a nostalgic idea of independent Scotland."[87] The Poker's choice of claret underscores the highly self-conscious politicking taking place during meetings. Perhaps no other drink could have been more appropriately used to toast the ideal of an independent Scotland protected by its own militia.

Lasting between four to six hours, Poker Club meetings provided ample time and opportunity for excessive consumption of alcohol; even at two drinks an hour (mild by eighteenth-century standards), a member would consume a large amount of alcohol in the time allotted. However, Wilson suggests that "regular and repetitive drinking is not necessarily perceived as drunkenness or alcoholism, and such behaviours may not be a sign of a breakdown in culture, but rather may be evidence of a strong and supportive cultural framework."[88] This appears to have been the case with the Poker, where membership was confined to only those with the express intention of achieving a specific political goal. The club's membership rolls are quite impressive in this respect; key members included David Hume, Adam Smith, historian William Robertson, Professors Hugh Blair, Joseph Black, John Gregory, Francis Home, Sir John Dalrymple, architect John Adam, and playwright John Home.[89] The Poker truly lived up to its exceptional membership in this regard: while its convivial sociability aligned it with several other British clubs and practices at that time, its single-minded political function illustrated how seriously prominent literati took their Scottish national identities.

Formed in early 1762 and inspired by recent memories of the defeats of two Militia Acts, the Poker was formed and named, in Adam Ferguson's words, as "an Alusion [sic] to the use of that Instrument when fires like ours need to be Stirred."[90] Rather than name themselves the Militia Club (an earlier alternative voted down for being "so directly… [and] obviously offensive"), the Poker employed convivial sociability as a means of enlivening members and further stirring up support for its cause.[91] Sher notes that the club's "convivial character was enhanced by food and drink," acting as a central element of the social experience.[92] Despite the club's drinking practices, Alexander Carlyle asserts in his *Autobiography* that "the Great Object of those meetings was National, of which [members] never lost sight."[93] Like its covert name, the Poker Club promoted its national goal through indirect means, employing members' influence and position to promote political change.

Although Carlyle later claimed in his autobiography that he witnessed "never even an approach to inebriety in any of the members," Sher notes that Carlyle's remark perhaps owes more to "sensitivity about the club's character and manners" than to historical veracity.[94] It may also owe much to the changes in perceptions of drinking in the late eighteenth century, especially

the medicalization of drunkenness into alcoholism. Viewing the Poker Club as a site of excessive alcohol consumption would negate any "thinking" at work, for the very conception of alcoholism as a disease involves the loss of rationality and represents the mind as uncontrollably governed by addiction. Wilson argues that such conceptions may not provide an accurate understanding of how cultural groups experience and use alcohol consumption for specific, goal-oriented purposes:

> National and ethnic identities must be understood in the context of other identities and identifications, such as those of class, gender, region, locality and religion, and all of these find important expression in drinking sites and practices. If and when alcohol and drinking are moral and health problems, they may also be, perhaps always are, elements of social and political integration and order, where culture and identity have as much to do with the acceptance of drinking as they do with its avoidance.[95]

Few other clubs from mid-century Edinburgh so literally and deliberately used (and accepted) alcohol consumption as a key element, in Wilson's words, of "social and political integration and order."

Later historians have perceived the Poker as an ineffectual organization since it was ultimately unable to help passage of the Militia Act before it disbanded. In fact, Sher observes that "it is difficult to know precisely what the Poker did to promote the Scottish militia cause, and it has sometimes been claimed that it did not actually pursue its avowed political agenda."[96] Such critiques simplify the process by which political change occurs by focusing on and accepting only end-oriented results. Although it may not have been able to ensure passage of the Militia Act, the Poker Club influenced the debate through the offices of its members. The club may have commissioned pro-militia publications through its secretary Sir William Pulteney, as well as promoted its cause through pseudonymous guises such as the "Antigalican Society."[97] The club's minutes provide evidence of parliamentary lobbying done on behalf of the Poker. For instance, the entry for July 26, 1782 records the election of "the marquess of Graham… [who was] designated to receive a letter of thanks for his 'noble [work] in the business of the Scotch Militia last session.'"[98] Unlike the Select Society, the Poker used influence derived through convivial sociability to actively agitate for its cause, rather than settling for debating the issue in an open forum.

In this way, the Poker explored new territory in club life of mid-eighteenth-century Scotland; by constructing a social site for drinking and thinking, the club allowed members to share thoughts and ideas on the militia issue by appealing to their common national identities. Such drinking helped to create a space for the intimate exchange of ideas, and convivial sociability was a key means for members to contribute their ideas to the Scottish cause. As Wilson remarks, "drinking is a key practice in the social construction of the world as it is and as it should be."[99] With a dedicated goal for Scotland "as it should be," the Poker Club offered members a powerful and lasting experience that

infused convivial sociability with love of the nation.[100]

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Endnotes

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1. James Buchan's recent work on the Scottish Enlightenment highlights this feature of the city with its very title: James Buchan, *Crowded with Genius, The Scottish Enlightenment: Edinburgh's Moment of Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).

2. Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000): 1.

3. See Corey E. Andrews *Literary Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Club Poetry* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2004) for an account of literary clubs in eighteenth-century Scotland. See also Davis McElroy's *Scotland's Age of Improvement: A Survey of Eighteenth-Century Literary Clubs and Societies* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1969) for a more general account of club life during this period.

4. Clark, *British Clubs*, 2.

5. Ibid.

6. See Andrews, *Literary Nationalism*,1-23 for a discussion of Scottish clubs' relationship to national identity-formation.

7. See McElroy *Scotland's Age of Improvement*, 49-67, for evidence of this view of the Select Society and the Poker Club.

8. Phil Withington, "Company and Sociability in Early Modern England," *Social History* 32 (2007): 297.

9. James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004): 300.

10. Ibid.

11. Richard B. Sher, "Poker Club (*act.* 1762–1784)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

12. Boswell, *London Journal*, 300.

13. Quoted in Sher, "Poker Club".

14. Roy Porter, "The Drinking Man's Disease: The 'Pre-History' of Alcoholism in Georgian Britain," *British Journal of Addiction* 80 (1985): 385.

15. Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830* (New York: Longman, 1983): 232.

16. Judith Hunter, "English Inns, Taverns, Alehouses and Brandy Shops: The Legislative Framework, 1495-1797," *The World of the Tavern: Public Houses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Beat Kumin and B. Ann Tlusty (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2002): 79.

17. Jessica Warner, "Before There Was 'Alcoholism': Lessons from the Medieval Experience with Alcohol," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 19 (1992): 416.

18. John Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996) remains a useful source on social mores, drinking customs in particular. Henry Gray Graham's *The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1899) also offers a highly flavored account of Scottish drinking practices at the time, as does E.B. Ramsay's *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character* (New York: R. Worthington, 1877).

19. Porter, "Drinking Man's Disease," 386.

20. See Daniel Paton's "The Legend of Drunken Scotland," in *Alcohol and Drugs: The Scottish Experience*, ed. Martin Plant, Bruce Ritson, and Roy Robertson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992): 10-17.

21. Roy Porter, "Introduction," in Thomas Trotter *An Essay Medical, Philosophical, and*

Chemical on Drunkenness and its Effects on the Human Body, ed. Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1988): ix.

22. Thomas Wilson, "Drinking Cultures: Sites and Practices in the Production and Expression of Identity," in Wilson, ed. *Drinking Cultures*, 10.

23. Roy Porter, "Consumption: Disease of the Consumer Society?" in *Consumption and the World of Goods,* ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993): 59.

24. Mariana Valverde, *Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 25.

25. Brian Cowman, "The Rise of the Coffeehouse Reconsidered," *Historical Journal* 47 (2004): 33.

26. Brian Cowman, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (London: Yale University Press, 2005): 32.

27. Clark, *English Alehouse*, 5.

28. Kumin and Tlusty, "The World of the Tavern: An Introduction," in Kumin and Tlusty, *World of the Tavern*, 6.

29. Ibid., 300.

30. Angela McShane Jones, "Roaring Royalists and Ranting Brewers: The Politicisation of Drink and Drunkenness in Political Broadside Ballads from 1640 to 1689," in *A Pleasing Sinne: Drink and Conviviality in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Adam Smyth (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004): 73.

31. Ibid., 421.

32. Clark, *English Alehouse*, 231.

33. Ibid., 13, 231.

34. Ibid., 14.

35. Clark, *British Clubs*, 12.

36. John Chartres, "The Eighteenth-century English Inn: A Transient 'Golden Age'?," in Kumin and Tlusty, *World of the Tavern*, 225.

37. Roy Porter, "Introduction," in Jean-Charles Sourina, *A History of Alcoholism,* Trans. Nick Hindley and Gareth Stanton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990): ix.

38. See for instance Elvin Jellinek, *The Disease Concept of Alcoholism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Hillhouse Press, 1960): Perti Alasuutari's *Desire and Craving: A Cultural Theory of Alcoholism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), and Sounier, *History of Alcoholism*.

39. Porter, "Drinking Man's Disease," 385.

40. Ibid., 391.

41. Jessica Warner, "'Resolv'd to Drink No More': Addiction as a Preindustrial Construct." *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 32 (1994): 686.

42. Robin Room, "The Cultural Framing of Addiction," *Janus Head* 6 (2003): 224.

43. Ibid., 225.

44. Ibid., 227.

45. Valverde, *Diseases of the Will,* 33, 42.

46. Dana Rabin, "Drunkenness and Responsibility for Crime in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005): 457.

47. Ibid., 463.

48. Ibid., 470.

49. Ibid., 465.

50. Ibid., 476.

51. Benjamin Rush, "The Effects of Ardent Spirits Upon Man," *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush,* ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1947): 334.

52. Ibid., 340.

53. Ibid., 336.

54. See Patrick Dillon, *Gin: The Much Lamented Death of Madam Geneva* (Boston: Justin, Charles & Co. Publishers, 2003) and Jessica Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 2002).

55. Warner, *Craze*, 4.

56. Porter, "Introduction," in Trotter, *An Essay Medical*, x.

57. Porter, "The Drinking Man's Disease," 393.

58. Clark, *British Clubs*, 12.

59. Ibid., 131.

60. Ibid., 120.

61. Roger L. Emerson, "Select Society (*act.* 1754–1764)," in Matthew and Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

62. Clark, *British Clubs*, 119.

63. Emerson, "Select Society."

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid. Emerson further notes that "the essays of Lord Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and David Hume provided a fruitful source of subject matter, as did current affairs; in 1760, for example, the society debated and condemned the then vexatious issue of giving vales (the tipping of servants). The final question list numbered 158, of which 97 were considered in at least 155 debates held between 1754 and January 1763."

66. John Ingamells, "Ramsay, Allan, of Kinkell (1713–1784)," in Matthew and Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

67. Clark, *British Clubs* 119.

68. McElroy, 49. Apparently, Hume never spoke, and Adam Smith was said to have spoken only once at a Select Society meeting. Such facts alone should indicate some level of dissatisfaction with the Select Society on their part.

69. Emerson, "Select Society."

70. Quoted in Buchan, 219. Fletcher's views on militias are assessed in his *DNB* entry, which offers the following synopsis: "[Fletcher's] *A Discourse Concerning Militia's and Standing Armies* was published in London in the autumn of 1697, as a contribution to the 'standing army controversy' which broke out on the announcement of the treaty of Ryswick earlier that year." See John Robertson, "Fletcher, Andrew, of Saltoun (1653?–1716)," in Matthew and Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

71. Quoted in Buchan, 219. Ferguson's *DNB* entry highlights the centrality of the militia debate to his career: "For many Scots the creation of a citizen militia was a symbol of national pride, which by forbidding highlanders to carry arms, parliament made impossible after the Jacobite rising of 1745. Ferguson was a central figure in the spirited, yet unsuccessful, militia agitation." See Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Ferguson, Adam (1723–1816)," in Matthew and Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

72. Oz-Salzberger, "Ferguson."

73. The most influential account of this process remains Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). See Chapter 3 "Peripheries" for an especially lucid and compelling discussion of the Scoto-English divide in the mid-century.

74. Emerson, "Select Society."

75. See McElroy, 34-70 and David Daiches's *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth-Century Experience* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) for such interpretations of the Select Society's cultural role.

76. Emerson, "Select Society."

77. Quoted in Emerson, "Select Society."

78. Quoted in Buchan, *Crowded with Genius*, 134.

79. Ingamells, "Ramsay, Allan."

80. Emerson, "Select Society."

81. Rush, "Effects of Ardent Spirits," 338-39.

82. Trotter, *An Essay Medical*, 10.

83. Ibid., 127.

84. Wilson, "Drinking Cultures," 3.

85. Ibid., 7.

86. Sher, "Poker Club."

87. Charles C. Ludington, "'To the king o'er the water': Scotland and claret, c. 1660-1763," *Alcohol: A Social and Cultural History*, 164.

88. Ibid., 13.

89. Ibid.
90. Quoted in Sher, "Poker Club."
91. Sher, "Poker Club.".
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid.
95. Wilson, "Drinking Cultures," 21.
96. Sher, "Poker Club."
97. Ibid.
98. Quoted in Sher, "Poker Club."
99. Wilson, "Drinking Cultures," 13.
100. The Poker Club disbanded in 1784 due to pragmatic difficulties facing its aging membership. At its heyday the club held twenty-three meetings a year; by the 1780s the meetings were nearly half that number and attendance had dropped from the seventies to between eight and thirteen members. A "Young Poker Club" was proposed in the mid-1780s but faltered due to lack of interest. See Sher, "Poker Club."