

Elite women in the age of Enlightenment in Scotland.

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A review of

Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Polite Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*.

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In February 1743 eleven-year-old Betty Fletcher concluded a note to her father with the proud assertion about her writing: 'this is misses own hand'. Such precocious expressions of female authorship and delicacy with the pen were a feature of elite Scottish women's confident self-presentation as models of polite behaviour in the age of Enlightenment. Not content to leave the definition of 'feminine' roles to eighteenth-century men, the women of Scottish aristocratic and gentry families carved out their own culture of politically engaged, intellectually active womanhood that served to sustain, and was sustained by, an intense urban sociability.

Katharine Glover's sparkling account of these women's lives in the period 1720 to 1770 is based on research in the personal papers of a representative group of individuals who occupied the top rungs of the social ladder. While most of her examples are drawn from landed gentry families, such as the Fletchers of Saltoun and Elliots of Minto, Glover also includes daughters and wives from the Murray clan, whose principal male heirs bore the title of Duke of Atholl. By studying a selection of female subjects, Glover is able to tease out variations in the women's lifestyles and explore the importance of wealth, as well as birth, in creating a sliding scale of opportunities to participate in polite society. London stood out as 'a place of glamorous potential' but its aristocratic circles were accessible only to the richest and most well connected. Meanwhile, the lively hub of Edinburgh, where girls from elite families attended boarding schools, was much missed in later life by married women and widows who had moved to other parts of the country and were trying to maintain gentility on reduced means. How remote and isolating Skye seemed to these eighteenth-century eyes.

That so many hastily scribbled notes and thoughtfully crafted letters by elite Scottish women have survived in the archives is a small miracle in itself. Glover is careful to point out that such documents were often destroyed, either by their

recipients who tore up or burned letters, or at a later stage when the words of women were deemed unworthy of preservation in an archival collection. She also makes effective use of eighteenth-century elite men's letters, which were more likely to survive and which provide insights into household concerns and male perceptions of female activities.

Glover's six chapters portray different aspects of elite women's lives, from education and upbringing, to reading, hospitality, political activity, and travel. The voices of adolescents, of young adults, and individuals entering old age all appear throughout the book. The analysis is supported by prodigious research into the secondary literature on the Scottish Enlightenment, British social and political history, and gender history.

While the mixed-sex sociability that occurred in Edinburgh is at the heart of her story, Glover incorporates some illustrations of women confronted with social environments away from the Scottish capital that were more markedly masculine and centered upon alcohol consumption. The cities of Aberdeen, Dundee, and Glasgow, as well as the Highlands and Islands, are discussed at various points. Glover deftly shows how in these settings as well as in Edinburgh there could be slippage between the prescriptions for polite behaviour and what went on in practice. Lady Milton horrified a neighbour by speaking in a voice that was 'both strongly Scots and loud'. Lady Jean Murray incurred her father's wrath when she eloped with the Earl of Crawford. Betty Fletcher laid down the law to Colonel Lescelles, a witness to the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion: 'You old fusty Soldier mind your own business'.

If spirited participation in sociability took up much of these elite women's time, Glover observes that religious duties, keeping up with burgeoning correspondence, and care and education of children also had to be fitted into daily routine. The attention of the Scottish elite to cultivating 'perfection' in the English language and eradicating 'Scotticisms' from their speech heralded the greater focus on London, rather than Edinburgh, that would characterise their world after 1770.