

## William Smellie The Life of a Renaissance Scot

Written by Jim McLaughlin for the Bob Carnie Group – January 7, 2020

William Smellie was a man of remarkable intellect and possessed of multi-faceted talents. There is a case to be made that he deserves to be counted among that select few who contributed to the phenomenon known as the Scottish Enlightenment, which I will humbly attempt to make in this paper. His influence lasted from about 1760 until his death in 1795. But what of that name? Today, some who find themselves burdened by this unfortunate patronymic pronounce it 'Smiley', but he himself once remarked that "I am never ashamed of my name, although it is a very queer one". It was indeed.

To place him among the pantheon of Scottish geniuses who played a key role in that golden era of intellectual awakening that helped to earn Edinburgh the title of *Athens of the North*, and prompted Tobias Smollett to declare that '**Edinburgh is a hotbed of genius**', it needs to be said that William Smellie played his part largely in the shadows. As such, he never achieved the recognition of men like Adam Smith or David Hume, or even Hugh Blair. His trade was that of an editor and printer, a modest enough occupation, but he was also an eminent naturalist, a multi-linguist, a translator and an accomplished writer. Also, as the first editor of the Encyclopedia Britannica, he not only guided it toward the success that has flourished to the present day, but was by far the most prolific contributor of articles to its all-important first edition.

As an editor of manuscripts, his genius shone through, even though the chaplet of 'genius' is seldom bestowed upon one engaged in such a comparatively non-intellectual metier. But he was highly self-educated in numerous fields of knowledge, as well as an accomplished literary figure in his own right, which equipped him with a unique ability to infuse exceptional added value into most of the material he was charged with editing. Frequently his knowledge of the subject matter was at least on a par with the author whose work he was reviewing. As such, his contributions were not just limited to correcting errors of spelling, syntax and typography, or the other fixes normally expected of an editor, but he was also frequently able to advise writers as to the accuracy of their facts, the merits of their analysis, the redundant verbosity of language or argument, and other helpful suggestions that often materially improved the substance of the authors' works. Most were very appreciative of the help and guidance he was able to offer that went far beyond his purely technical expertise.

### His Early Life

Born in 1740 in The Pleasance, a suburb of Edinburgh, William was the youngest son of Alexander Smellie, a stone mason and master builder; as a master builder he was also deemed to be qualified as an architect. He was held in high esteem within his profession and was a scholar of literature. He was also a poet of no small ability, at least in William's estimation, versifying even in Latin. His grandfather was of the same trade and high status, and one of only three architects in Edinburgh in the early 1700's, one of whom was William Adam of the renowned Adam dynasty. It seems likely that the family would have been modestly comfortable financially.

William's father was a very committed conservative Presbyterian and a member of the Cameronian sect, an offshoot of the persecuted Covenanters. His membership of this group would have exposed him at times to some risk of censure or worse, which forced him to be secretive about his beliefs and his religious affiliation. Little is known of his mother other than that she died when William was very young. His father too departed at a relatively young age when William was just under fourteen years of age, leaving him and an older brother and three sisters at a vulnerable time in their lives. There was virtually no inheritance, and the young William had to provide most of the financial support for two of his sisters until sadly they both died of consumption.

After receiving good basic schooling, first at Duddingston parish school and later at the High School of Edinburgh, at 12 years of age William's father set out to apprentice him to a stay-maker (women's stays!), but as they failed to agree on terms, he was instead taken on as an apprentice printer with the firm of Hamilton, Balfour & Neill for a contracted period of 6½ years. As sarcastically observed by William's principal memoirist, Robert Kerr in 1811, it seems unlikely that he would have risen to the heights of the intellectual grandee he became had he spent his youth in "*the mortifying drudgery of scraping whalebone, and stitching coats of armour to force the female form into every shape save that of natural elegance*".

### **Apprenticed to a Printer**

William applied himself to the work in a manner that characterized the rest of his life: he was hard-working, conscientious and highly intelligent and determined to succeed in his new profession. His rate of pay at the beginning of his apprenticeship was three shillings a week, but after four years - when he was about 16 or 17 - his recognized excellence as a *clean setter* prompted the firm's partners to appoint him 'Corrector' of their press. This promotion increased his weekly earnings to ten shillings, no doubt welcomed in helping to provide the support required by his sisters.

The printing firm's location was within the grounds of Edinburgh University, and part way into his apprenticeship William was given permission by the partners to attend lectures. He took full advantage of this and successfully juggled the duties of his job with his attendances at the lectures. He made use of every minute of the day to excel in his professional duties while assiduously attending college courses to equip him for the pursuit of his literary ambitions, and in an effort to further his knowledge of various branches of science, in particular Botany, which in Smellie's time was included under the banner of Natural Philosophy. These lectures included the study of Hebrew primarily, it seems, to provide him with sufficient knowledge of that language to act as corrector of a publication project for a series of volumes in Hebrew grammar. This would have added to his already expert knowledge of Latin and French.

In 1757 the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh launched a competition with a prize for the most accurate edition of a Latin classic work of a Roman playwright known familiarly as Terence. With the approval of his employer he was given the go-ahead to compete on the firm's behalf. William's considerable aptitude in Latin - and no doubt his ambition

to shine in both the printing and literary worlds - prompted him to take up this challenge. He produced what was acclaimed to be an *immaculate* edition, beautiful in its fineness of printing and incomparable in its accuracy. He won the award for his firm, along with a large silver medal...his first great success in life.

William's indentures expired on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1759 when he was approximately nineteen years old. Shortly after, as a result of his widely recognized skill at his profession, he was head-hunted by the printing firm of Murray & Cochrane. He commenced with them, still as *Corrector*, in September 1759 with an increase in salary to 16s per week, or £42 per annum. The firm was a well-respected general printer, but notable for their production of *The Scots Magazine*, which had been in publication since 1739. It was popular in 1759 and remains so today. William stayed with the firm for six-and-a-half years, and although there are no records to confirm it, he was almost certainly the key employee in the editing and printing of the magazine.

As part of his contractual agreement, he was permitted to continue attending university courses for three hours a day and it is known that he studied under many eminent professors. This can be seen as a mark of his determination to greatly expand his knowledge in a variety of fields, including Mathematics, Logic, Rhetoric, Natural Philosophy, Moral Philosophy and Hebrew, as well as Medicine, the sciences and Literature. He took a special interest in Botany, one of the subjects covered under the Natural Philosophy and Natural History classes he attended, and he would later distinguish himself as a Naturalist. His scope and intensity of study was truly prodigious...and that only as a part-time student. It has always been wondered by those who have taken an interest in his story what his motivation was for this seemingly relentless pursuit of knowledge. It begs the question, did he have another profession in mind, or was it more a thirst for knowledge and how that could be applied to his profession? It is said that he denied having ambitions beyond being a master printer - perhaps the best of all printers - but while he remained in his chosen profession, among many other achievements he did distinguish himself as a published author and a recognized expert in that publication's topic, Natural History.

### **The Proliferation of Societies and the Pursuit of Personal Development**

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, clubs and societies abounded throughout Britain, and this was no less true of Edinburgh University where students and alumni sought ways to share and expand their knowledge in socially convivial meetings, elevated in purpose through the adoption of a title that would not only identify the discipline or field of knowledge that was the focus of their interest, but would also bestow a semblance of intellectual purpose. In 1760 William became a founding member of the Newtonian Society, so named after the great Isaac Newton who was held to be first distinguished scientist dedicated to 'the true science of nature'. The emphasis of the Newtonian Society was on *natural philosophy*, or in today's parlance, the natural sciences, comprising mainly biology and botany, but also the nascent study of physics and chemistry. Given its fellowship of mostly young gentlemen, almost all of whom would have been steeped in the classics and were precociously erudite, it served also as a literary society and a debating club for all manner of topics. Its membership of about

twenty included many distinguished (or soon to be) men of the time, who met weekly for at least the next four years.

It is clear from William's letters, addressed to a wide range of friends and acquaintances, that neither he nor his correspondents tended to waste much verbiage on pleasantries or polite enquiries about the health or affairs of the other. Many of his contemporaries cultivated the art of letter writing as a means both of sharpening their writing skills (for the great works of science, philosophy or literature that most of them aspired to produce one day) and creating a forum for the airing and debating of their views and philosophical theories, all in the cause of mutual self-improvement. Most often, they launched quite quickly into a pet subject or hypothesis, followed by a 'disputation' (a word seldom encountered today) on the factual or philosophical merits or otherwise of the chosen topic. Too often though, they adopted as settled science some recently popular, but specious, notion or theory that completely lacked foundation. But that was a fashion of the time when science was still in its formative phase.

Even long after their university days, they continued to join clubs and societies, or as with the young Mr Smellie, colluded to start their own. In 1778, a new society came into being, the Newtonian Club (not associated with the long defunct Newtonian Society mentioned above), with William Smellie as Secretary. There was clearly a connection between this and the Philosophical Society, which began life as the Medical Society of Edinburgh in 1737, then, in order to expand the scope of its learned activities to all the natural sciences, was renamed the Philosophical Society. Finally, upon receiving a royal charter in 1783, it adopted the title of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and was soon recognized as the leading scientific society in all of Scotland. Like the earlier Newtonian Society, the new Newtonian Club had a limit of twenty members who first had to be members of the Philosophical Society; meetings of the former were convened following adjournment of those of the latter, evidence of the connection between the two. William's involvement with the Philosophical Society (and later the Society of Antiquaries as described below) was indicative of his interest in the natural sciences that would lead to him writing and publishing his **Philosophy of Natural History** in 1790. But more of that later.

Returning to the chronology of William's life and progress, we can see that he made good use of his six-year tenure with Messrs Murray & Cochrane. At the age of just twenty-one he had diligently and methodically pursued a program of self-improvement in his literary and scientific studies and, thanks also to his highly gifted intellect, had mastered these fields of knowledge to such a degree that, arguably, he would soon prove himself worthy of a place in the pantheon of Edinburgh's 18<sup>th</sup> Century literati. But that would be in the future. In the meantime, he had earned his spurs in his profession as a printer both in his mastery of the technical side of the business and in the creative role, not only of mundane editing, but (as mentioned earlier) in his knowledge of much of the subject matter that made him a valued advisor to the authors whom he served.

### **Smellie the Naturalist – Modest Beginnings**

While working for Murray & Cochrane, in 1760 William began to compose a botanical essay that required the collection of samples of as many flowering plants that he could find in the fields around Edinburgh. He went out in the early mornings before work along with a young associate whom he employed to assist him. Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags were the most prolific locations for his collection. Each of the 400 plants gathered was inserted into a folio and on the opposite page he described the plant as to its features and function to the extent of his understanding and research. When completed, he provided the folio to Dr John Hope, Professor of Botany at Edinburgh University, whose lectures he regularly attended. His resulting dissertation earned William an honorary gold medal awarded each year by Professor Hope for the best botanical dissertation.

Dr Hope held William in such high esteem that when he suffered a leg sprain so serious that he was unable to attend for his Botany classes, he appointed William to deliver the lectures for the six-week period of his absence. William's fellow students were reportedly most appreciative of his professorial talents.

### **Dr William Buchan – An Unusual Collaboration**

In about 1760, shortly after he commenced employment with Murray & Cochrane, William began a correspondence and somewhat friendship with Dr William Buchan that continued for at least ten years. Dr Buchan - a general medical practitioner only a year older than Smellie - began by taking a personal interest in William's professional future. He had somehow been made aware of William's considerable talents and was quite relentless in encouraging him to pursue medical studies as a pathway into a profession more suited to his intellect than the printing trade. William did seem to follow his advice to a degree by enrolling in several medical and science-based courses at Edinburgh University, but he resisted Buchan's siren call to join him in the medical or dispensing fields, mainly because of the uncertainty of long-term income and employment prospects. He was doing relatively well as a printer/editor, so that bird in his hand offered a greater degree of certainty than the untested options lurking in the bush.

Nevertheless, their association did lead to a mutually beneficial business arrangement. Dr Buchan - who did not prosper particularly well as a family physician - came up with an idea for a publication which he felt would help fill a void in the medical advice realm that he hoped would be generally popular. It was eventually published, in 1770, under the title of *Domestic Medicine* and was indeed so popular that it ran to twenty editions. William played a crucial part in the publication's success through his editing skills and his own knowledge of medicine, newly acquired through his attending many lectures of the faculty of medicine courses at Edinburgh University. Buchan came to rely very heavily on William's advice, and accepted the latter's rewriting of most of the content to reduce the massively redundant content of the original manuscript. Without William's input, the publication would have been wholly unmarketable.

### **A convinced Christian**

There is an interesting letter from Smellie to a young minister friend wherein he lays bare his thoughts and philosophy concerning his personal values and religious beliefs. It is an appeal for help, addressed to a student of divinity, to resolve his struggle with these important life issues. The letter is undated but was probably written during his twenty-second year. He makes clear that, after comparing the precepts of various religions, he is a totally convinced Christian. He speaks about the challenges of life that distract from the important observances demanded of his faith, but (curiously) cites 'bashfulness' as a major impediment to achieving his goal of good religious practice. With his mother's death when he was still very young, he looked to his father as a role model, but the latter failed to indulge in family devotion despite being devoutly committed to his faith. He tells his friend that he has struggled to overcome this social and religious introversion, with some degree of success. He did make an earlier attempt to conduct family worship - presumably with his siblings, acting in his role as head of household following his father's recent death - but failed miserably. He feels that he is ready to try again and vows that he will do so when he manages to dispense with a lodger currently living in their home. What this seems to tell us about the young William is that he is striving very hard to be virtuous and is a wholly committed Christian.

### **Marriage and Family**

Sometime in 1763 at the age of twenty-two, William married Miss Jean Robertson. She came from a well-placed and respected family background and was about five years his junior. Jean's father had made his mark as an army agent, an occupation that encompassed the provision of a wide range of services to both the men in uniform as well as to the various bureaucratic agencies connected with the armed forces. It was a lucrative profession, but he managed to spend his way through his modest fortune, leaving his family close to destitute. William's income at that time was barely enough to take on the financial burdens of family life, but he seemed to have been banking on his young wife being able to contribute earnings of her own. However, Jean's occupation became that of mother to thirteen children, six sons and seven daughters. Only four of his sons and four of his daughters survived him at the time of his death in 1795. His oldest son, William, later joined him in his printing business.

### **Striking Out - Business Partnerships**

In March of 1765, after having qualified as a master printer, William entered into a co-partnership with brothers William and Robert Ward. He had struggled financially since marrying two years prior, so at first lacked the capital required for his share of the new printing business. He was promised £100 by Dr Buchan as his fee for editing Buchan's future publication of his *Domestic Medicine*, but that would not be payable until later. After appealing to three friends, he was able to raise £100. Robert Auld left the partnership less than two years later, his place being taken by John Balfour, a former publishing bookseller in Edinburgh, although Balfour took almost no part in the day-to-day operations of the business. In November 1771, William Auld also exited, ownership of the business passing to Smellie and Balfour until that too was dissolved in 1782. William then partnered with Edinburgh's William Creech, who, like Balfour, was a publishing bookseller. It was through this partnership that the Edinburgh Edition of the

works of Robert Burns was produced. The Smellie-Creech partnership ended in December 1789, after which Smellie operated his business entirely on his own.

Throughout the years of his various business ventures and partnerships, William struggled to meet his capital and operating financial commitments. He did manage to enlist the support of wealthy sponsors (beginning with Lord Kames, as described below) who agreed to act as sureties for his business loans, but right up to his death he was continuously under a cloud of financial stress, and that despite his printing business generally maintaining a healthy order book. It seems likely that he paid insufficient attention to the financial side of his business, particularly as regards management of his accounts receivable, among other challenges. But that is speculation on my part.

At about the end of his partnership with Creech, Smellie was in conversation with William Strahan, a printer baron in London. There was a proposal that Smellie enter the management of Strahan's vast empire, but it never came to fruition, quite likely because Smellie was involved in several business transactions back in Edinburgh. Also, he was an Edinburgh man, born and bred, with a wealth of contacts and a reputation built up over the span of his career, so the thought of entering the uncertain maw of London's business world must have seemed too daunting. A few years later he claimed to enjoy a comfortable income of £200 per annum, so this would have been a further incentive to remain put. He was also involved in a few literary projects that were very important to him.

### **Cornering the Market**

It has been said that almost all the quality literature being produced in Scotland was being edited and printed by William Smellie during the core years of his role as Edinburgh's leading printer. That might be a qualifiable assertion, but his knowledge of much of the subject matter being submitted for publication and the solid reputation he enjoyed for excellence in his profession, makes the claim credible for the most part.

Beginning in 1765, and continuing until his death, Smellie held the contract as *Printer* to the University of Edinburgh. One of his principal 'jobs' was the printing of medical theses - all written in Latin - for the University's School of Medicine. These theses required careful typography to ensure the greatest possible accuracy, and William's great knowledge of the medical sciences, as well as his competence in the Latin language, made him an ideal choice as printer. During most of the same time period, (and extending beyond his death to the advantage of his son who carried on the family business) he had also established a monopoly as Printer to the Faculty of Advocates, printing the law theses required of all students being examined for admission to the Scots bar, together with the printing of judgements of the Court of Session and various other legal printing requirements.

### **Friendship with Lord Kames**

In early 1774, William made a request to Henry Home - better known as Lord Kames - then a Judge of the High Court of Judiciary and an eminent writer, agricultural improver and leading philosopher. He is now regarded as a prominent member of the Scottish

Enlightenment movement. William asked this very highly-placed figure to act as a financial surety for the amount of £200-300 in order that he could set up an account not unlike a secure overdraft, as a fund to draw on to finance his share of the growing business associated with his partnership with Balfour. Kames agreed, seemingly with undeterred dispatch. The two men had been acquainted since about 1764 when William sent Kames an anonymous critique of a work, the *Elements of Criticism*, the third edition of which was being readied for printing. William had served as 'corrector' for the publication, and despite risking being regarded as impertinent, Kames was impressed with the input offered by Smellie. Kames asked the correspondent to reveal himself, and thus began an intimate friendship that lasted until Kames's death about eighteen years later.

Following their auspicious (at first) anonymous acquaintance, at Kames' invitation William provided critiques and suggestions for many other works of the prolific jurist. Following Kames' death in 1782, William provided a *memoir* that was included in the third edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. He planned to compose a fuller biographical account of the life of Kames, but his own demise overtook that intention.

### **First Editor of the Encyclopedia Britannica**

William Smellie is probably best known universally as the first editor of the Encyclopedia Britannica. As noted in the introduction to this paper, he was much more than that; he was also by far the principal contributor of articles and the driving force behind its publication. Andrew Bell and Colin Macfarquhar - engraver and printer respectively - founded what at first was described as the *Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences*. Smellie derided this choice of title, but at publication (probably on his insistence) 'Encyclopaedia Britannica' appeared first in the banner. The founders engaged Smellie to compile and "to prepare the whole work for the press etc., etc." for a fee of just £200, a paltry sum considering the enormous contribution he made to its final publication. Launched in 1768, the first edition was published in 1771 in three volumes that comprised 2391 pages and 160 copperplate illustrations. It is not known for certain how many copies of this first edition were printed; three thousand has been mentioned, but it may have been less. The cost was £12 per set.

Given the success of this venture, William almost certainly would have made a goodly fortune if he had continued in his role through the many subsequent and expanding editions. But he disagreed with a decision by the owners to include biographies in the second and subsequent editions of the Encyclopedia. Smellie thought biographies were not suitable inclusions for a dictionary of the arts and sciences. Despite being offered the same editorship and management of the second edition (published in 1776) and an offer of partnership in lieu of salary, his scruples did not allow him to accept the offer, and so he parted ways with his employers.

### **The Edinburgh Magazine and Review**

William's next project involved the launching of a monthly periodical in partnership with Dr Gilbert Stuart and four others, Smellie and Stuart being the major hands-on partners. In mid-October 1773 these two very talented individuals published the first edition of



*The Edinburgh Magazine and Review*. In advertising the scope and variety of the articles and reviews they intended to feature in the monthly issues, the goals and concept as described promised a magazine that would be unrivalled in its richness and quality of content. It warranted primacy in its roll of writers and reviewers and promised to both entertain and inform. The prospectus seemed almost too good to be true, but the ingenuity and talent of Smellie and Stuart offered an assurance of delivery. Nevertheless, the last of just 47 issues was published in August 1776. The magazine failed, not for want of the talent that seemed assured in the two principle partners, but, according to Smellie's memoirist, "owing to the harsh irritability of temper and the severe and almost indiscriminate satire" displayed by Stuart and other reviewers. There were several instances of reviews that were considered by many leading subscribers as being facile and/or unfairly harsh, and this led to the magazine's circulation rapidly declining.

The final nail in the publication's coffin was the inclusion of a review by Smellie's partner, Gilbert Stuart, of a work by James Burnett – Lord Monboddo, a judge of the Court of Session. It was titled *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, and Stuart's review was regarded by many as an attack of such prejudice and severity that the credibility of the magazine was left in tatters. Stuart was an exceptionally accomplished writer, but troubled, erratic and severely lacking in judgement. In correspondence, Smellie admitted his deep anxiety over the whole affair, and defended his own position by claiming that he had made strenuous efforts to modify the Monboddo review, but without success. The salt in the wound for Smellie was that Monboddo, who was held in much affection by those who knew him and was recognized as a leading figure in the Enlightenment movement, was a friend who included him in his exclusive circle of literati who attended his fortnightly *learned suppers*. Fortunately, despite the travails created by the acerbic approach taken in many of the reviews, Smellie and Monboddo maintained their friendship until the judge's death. As for Gilbert Stuart, his fondness for large quantities of 'good ale' and the dissipation that often accompanies such predilections, resulted in a severe case of dropsy and an early death in 1786 at the age of forty-four.

The Monboddo event caused William Smellie to accept with reluctance that the publication should be discontinued. About two years prior to the crisis, consideration had been given to separating the 'review' function from that of the magazine (creating two separate publications), but it had not been adopted. Had the success of the magazine depended solely on Smellie's contributions and selections, it seems likely that it would have prospered and become popular among Edinburgh's many competing publications.

### **William Smellie, Translator**

Mentioned earlier was William's proficiency in the French language. In fact, he was highly proficient, at least in the ability to understand and compose in the language. With this competency, and his expert knowledge of natural history, he undertook to translate into English each of the then-available volumes of a much-admired publication by a French Count, Georges Louis Leclerc Buffon, under the English title *Natural History*,

*General and Particular.* With the assistance of associates, Buffon worked on this encyclopedic description of nature and science for about 50 years, beginning in 1749. Smellie's translation - the first edition of which was published in about 1781 - runs to nine volumes and about 10,000 pages, with copious footnotes, indexes and classification systems added by Smellie himself; also 300 copperplate illustrations. It was clearly a massive undertaking, for Buffon and Smellie, and Buffon was so enamoured of William's translation that one of his associates travelled to Edinburgh to acknowledge his achievement. Ironically, while Buffon's approval of William's work was based mainly on the excellence of his translation, to his great surprise his friend reported that Smellie could barely mutter a coherent word of French. William is thought to have acquired his linguistic mastery exclusively from books and must have found few opportunities to practice the spoken word. I daresay many young students of French today would sympathize with our subject.

An interesting curiosity concerning William's approach to the translation is worth recounting. Rather than translate each line or sentence literally, he adopted the methodology of reading/studying segments of up to eight pages. After taking the time to comprehend and master the author's ideas, William would then proceed to compose his translation in his own words according to that understanding of the original. By this method he was able to impart a freshness of style that proved to be more interesting and pleasing to read rather than the wooden literalness that almost inevitably would have resulted if it were translated phrase by phrase. Few other translators could have matched this result; William's advantage was his own expert knowledge of the subject matter combined with a quite remarkable memory. The overall excellence achieved by Smellie, and the technical value that he added to the final publication, provides strong proof of his innate genius. His courage in undertaking such a massive project is indicative of his exceptional capacity for personal application and a gritty determination.

### **The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland**

In late 1780, the Earl of Buchan spearheaded an initiative to establish a new Edinburgh-based society for the investigation and collection of the antiquities of Scotland. Buchan invited William Smellie to a meeting of fourteen luminaries that was convened at the Earl's house on St Andrew's Square in the New Town on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1780. At a later meeting on December 18<sup>th</sup>, the group agreed to form themselves into The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. William was appointed as the society's official printer and in 1781 as Keeper and Superintendent of their Museum of Natural History. Much later, in 1793, he was appointed Secretary. In 1782, the Society of Antiquaries applied to King George III for a royal charter of incorporation, but it was unexpectedly strenuously opposed by a group of professors from Edinburgh University who, through the Senate of the University, petitioned the Lord Advocate to deny the charter on the basis that Scotland was too small a country to support two similar societies. The objections were in fact a little more convoluted than this, but the Lord Advocate was persuaded - largely by a response to the objecting professors thought to have been composed by Smellie - in favour to the Society of Antiquaries, and they were granted their charter in March 1783. The King even declared himself patron of the Society.

William Smellie was arguably the most active member of the Society through to his death in 1795, and a forceful advocate for the importance of its role to Scotland. As the Keeper of the Society's Museum of Natural History and a noted naturalist and later published author on the subject, he seemed especially dedicated to collecting specimens of Scotland's native birds and animals.

It was mentioned earlier that William had long been a member of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, and most of the Edinburgh professors who led the campaign attempting to deny the Society of Antiquaries a royal charter were fellow members. They would have been friends of William, or at least close acquaintances, and in their struggle to thwart the granting of the charter (for reasons not gone into in detail here) Smellie was seen by them as the embodiment, and even partially a cause, of their opposition.

In early 1783, the Royal Society of Edinburgh was established with the intention of bringing various similar societies under the same aegis. In practice, the membership was predominantly that of the Philosophical Society, the members of the latter being virtually exempted without question. In June of that year William became a member, but Lord Buchan scorned the opportunity as a protest against the unreasonable (as he saw it) opposition against the charter application of the Antiquary Society. Lord Buchan's spectre might now bridle in the realization that the Royal Society of Edinburgh thrives to this day.

### **Recognition as a Leading Naturalist**

Reference was made earlier to William's study of Botany under Professor John Hope in about 1760, and of his success in winning Dr. Hope's gold medal for his dissertation on Edinburgh's 'Hortus Siccus', or *fauna* as it might be described now. William was a keen student of the other natural sciences that included the study of animals (zoology); in addition, he became very knowledgeable in the developing field of chemistry. But his particular interest in the natural sciences provided the main motivation and expertise that led him to undertake the translation of Buffon's massive work, as well as making him so dedicated to his role as Keeper of the Museum of Natural History. In 1774, William's new-found friend, the eminent Lord Kames, had suggested that he develop a series of lectures on 'the philosophy and general economy of nature'. Smellie took up this challenge with characteristic energy and with the active encouragement of Dr. Ramsey, then professor of Natural History at Edinburgh University. However, he had to suspend his efforts in this for a few years after committing to translate Buffon's 'History'. He resumed work on his lectures in 1779, completing them in 1781; and ready to deliver them in the hall of the Society of Antiquities, with the tentative approval of the Society. At the time, this was considered totally appropriate, given William's role as Keeper of the Society's Museum of Natural History. But this plan was met with bitter opposition, which resulted in the lectures never being delivered.

An explanation of this unusual development requires that we step back a few years. Smellie earned the well-deserved reputation as a leading naturalist and gained the support and recognition of some of Edinburgh's most powerful elites. In 1775/76 that

influence was brought to bear when the professorship of Natural History at Edinburgh University became vacant upon the death of its incumbent, Dr. Ramsey, whom William had befriended in their shared interests. However, despite the best efforts of his promoters another candidate for the position, a Dr. Walker, was appointed. Walker was a church minister from Moffat who almost certainly was not as well qualified for the position as Smellie, but evidently he was able to muster even more powerful political support for his candidacy than William.

When, in 1781, it became known that Smellie was planning to deliver his lectures soon, the now established professor of natural history at Edinburgh University, Dr. Walker, launched vigorous opposition to his plan. With the full backing of the Senate of the University, he used all his political connections to stop the lectures, objecting “*that private teachers, for their own interest*” had no right to usurp the public role of education at the university. In reality, Walker was afraid that William’s lectures would cause some of his students - who paid tuition fees according to the number of classes they attended - to be diverted to these competing lectures instead of his, which would cut into his income. William countered that the content of his lectures was distinctly different from that of Walker’s and would attract a different clientele, such as members of the Society of Antiquities. But, ironically, supported by Lord Buchan, Walker got his way in the end and William’s course of lectures had to be abandoned. Another victory for Walker over William Smellie!

Despite what must have been a bitter disappointment, William had no option but to move on. Fortunately, the time and effort he had invested in preparing his lectures was far from wasted. He had intended to publish a work entitled *General System of Natural History*, which would have been based on the material he developed for his intended lectures, but he decided this would not be popular enough to be economically worthwhile. Instead, he focused on writing his **Philosophy of Natural History**, the first volume of which was published in 1790. According to his own account, he was inspired to undertake this project at the urgings of Lord Kames. The sources of the content of this more comprehensive work comprised the total of all his studies and papers on the topic of Natural History developed over many years dating from 1760, including the content of his never-delivered lectures. He sold the copyright of the first volume to Charles Elliot - an eminent Edinburgh bookseller - for one thousand guineas, with further payments of fifty guineas upon subsequent publication of future editions. His memoirist, William Kerr, thought that this was probably the highest sum paid for the copyright of a work in Edinburgh up to that point, a tribute to the esteem and talent accorded to Smellie both as a writer and a naturalist. Unfortunately, he died before receiving the agreed amount. The second volume was completed towards the end of 1793, but not published until 1798, three years after his death.

### **A Man of Letters**

William Smellie earned a reputation among his contemporaries as a gifted literary figure. Many of his works were of a technical nature, including his most important two-volume opus, the *Philosophy of Natural History*. But the latter, for example, was praised for its great clarity and ease of reading. He wrote on many other topics, including four

memoirs of leading figures of his age, the most notable being that honouring his friend and mentor Henry Home, Lord Kames. He also composed a great many essays on a wide range of topics, as well as several published pamphlets. And we know that most of the articles appearing in the first edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica were from his quill. At the time of his death he had also planned to produce an expansive account of the lives of twenty-five leading Scottish authors in the form of a 'Biographical Dictionary'.

### **The Philosopher's Apprentice**

William Smellie could not have claimed the mantle of noted *Philosopher*, at least not when compared to the great contemporary philosophers of the Enlightenment such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid or David Hume. Nevertheless, often he did display impressive understanding of the treatises of some of the masters of that esoteric art who were publishing during his time. As described earlier, his long friendship with Lord Kames arose from his at-first anonymous critique of the great man's *Elements of Criticism*. Later, we find him - in considerable depth - challenging a philosophical argument advanced by David Hume, and later still discussing, again at length, the merits of Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind*. There are several other occasions, evidenced in various of his letters, when he engaged in similar discourses on philosophical theories, either of his own or others. This intense interest in general philosophy is further proof of the scope and superior understanding of so many areas of knowledge that characterized this unusual individual. A true Renaissance man.

### **The Crochallan Fencibles**

This convivial club was founded by William Smellie in 1778. The meetings took place in a tavern in Anchor Close just off the High Street (Royal Mile) not far from Smellie's printing premises. The first part of its name related to a favourite song of the proprietor of the tavern, while the *Fencibles* was borrowed from the description of voluntary citizen militia units similar to the 'Home Guard' of WWII. Its membership was made up mostly from the ranks of Edinburgh's literary elite. Each of the members appropriated a military rank, such as Colonel (usually the club president), Major, etc. Smellie took on the role of club recorder, but very few of his accounts of club shenanigans have survived. New members, and even guests, often had to undergo ribald badinage that they were usually warned to expect ahead of time. Smellie introduced the poet Robert Burns to this gregarious assemblage during his first sojourn in Edinburgh and was reported to 'trash the poet most abominably', all in good fun of course. It is very likely that Burns' collection of bawdry verses, known as *The Merry Muses*, was at least partly inspired by this association. He almost certainly recited some of the pieces from this collection at one or more of the meetings of the Fencibles that he attended.

### **Robert Burns and William Smellie**

Crochallan came:

The old cock'd hat, the brown surtout the same,  
His grisly beard just brisling in its might  
('Twas four long nights and days to shaving night):  
His uncomb'd, hoary locks, wild-staring, thatch'd

*overcoat*

A head for thought profound and clear unmatched;  
Yet, tho his caustic wit was biting rude,  
His heart was warm, benevolent, and good.

Thus wrote the poet in a 'Sketch' of William Smellie, describing "*his unkempt appearance in contrast to the sharpness of his intellect*" (James Mackay). It may serve to lead us into a description of the important role Smellie played in the printing of the Edinburgh Edition of Scotland's Bard, and the friendship that developed between the two men. At this time, in December 1786 and into early 1787, Smellie was in partnership with William Creech, Edinburgh's leading bookseller/publisher. Burns spent many hours in Smellie's Anchor Close premises reviewing the proofs of this edition, so many hours in fact that Burns had his favourite stool that no one else dared to sit upon during the poet's visits.

He and the poet became firm friends and engaged in frequent correspondence during the years of their acquaintance. Those letters would have provided a wonderful insight into the humour and bawdy they inevitably would have indulged in, as well as providing a small window into the lives and characters of other prominent figures of their time. But other than one surviving letter of introduction (and a further two from Smellie to Burns that are more business related than personal), all those letters were deemed 'unfit for publication' either because of their raw content, or because they contained 'severe reflections' on those prominent figures who were still alive. Likewise, none seem to have been found among the poet's correspondence; perhaps some were, only to be similarly destroyed. We'll probably never know. Burns and Smellie were both well acquainted with Latin master William Nicol, who was a notorious Edinburgh 'character'. Their imagined unedited exchange of comments on Willie Nicol (for instance) might have served as a good example of how instructive and amusing such correspondence would have been had it survived the flames of extinction.

There was one likely survivor of a posthumous purge of materials passing between Burns and Smellie, namely **The Merry Muses of Caledonia**. The latter compilation - published first in 1799, probably by William Smellie's son, Alexander - was most likely found among Smellie's papers after his death. The bawdry verses were authored by Robert Burns and were almost certainly composed by Burns mainly for delivery at meetings of the Crochallan Fencibles. Whether they were collected individually by Smellie in his role as *recorder* of the Fencible meetings, or provided to Smellie by Burns for some other purpose (eventual publication?) is not known, but we can probably thank William Smellie as the source of this collection that otherwise presumably would have been lost forever.

The surviving letter referred to above was addressed to Smellie by Burns to introduce Maria Riddell, a talented and very beautiful young friend and protégé of the poet. Maria had spent a short time with her parents in the Leeward Islands and had maintained a detailed diary of her experiences there along with a sketchbook. Soon after she returned to Britain she drew upon these to author a book entitled *Voyages to the Madeira and Leeward Carribee (sic) Islands* and was keen to have it published. She

and her husband were planning a trip to Edinburgh to visit a relative, and Maria knew of Burns's personal and professional connections to Smellie. She asked him to provide the all-important introduction, which he did in a letter dated January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1792. It was love at first sight for Smellie, at least in a professional sense; he thoroughly enjoyed her book and moved quickly to publish it. They also corresponded on a fairly regular basis until just before Smellie's death. It is clear from those letters that there was mutual warmth of friendship and an interest in their respective family affairs.

As the only letter extant between the two men that illustrates their typical jocular exchanges, it might serve to summarize the contents. Burns begins with something of a rant, addressing what he believes touches on Smellie's prejudices regarding intellectually shallow artistes and flighty pretentious youths congregating in 'herds', as he refers to the inclinations of these fashion-obsessed flibbertigibbets and their male cohorts. He implies that the talented young lady appearing before him completely eschews such fripperies and assures him that she is gifted with the knowledge and talent that would make her a valued acquaintance. What's more, she is a poetess of no small ability. And as a great admirer of his *Philosophy of Natural History*, she is surely a kindred spirit who begs his acquaintance. But he warns his friend that, like him, she has the 'failing', nay - again like him - even the 'sin' of never remaining silent when confronted with something she dislikes or despises. This smacks both of a mischievous poke in the ribs of his old pal, but also a not-so-subtle suggestion that he and Maria might share a bond in their outspoken dislike of what they don't like! Burns indulges in a lengthy closing oration that comes across more like a funerary farewell than the usual 'let's keep in touch' sign-off. It is worth quoting verbatim:

**I will not send you the unmeaning "Compliments of the season," but I will send you, my warmest wishes, & most ardent prayers, that Fortune may never throw your subsistence to the mercy of a Knave, nor set your character on the judgement of a Fool! But that, upright and erect, you may walk to an honest grave where men of letters shall say, here lies a man who did honour to Science, & men of worth shall say, *here lies a man who did honour to Human Nature.***

Those last ten words that I have italicized provided the pithy encomium that was chosen as the inscription for the tombstone of William Smellie just three years later following his death on June 24, 1795. With that testament and the poet's further description of his friend as 'That old Veteran in Genius, Wit and B...dry', it is a fitting to conclude this account of the life and achievements of a truly remarkable Scot.

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Professor Ross Roy