Scholar-Printers of the Scottish Enlightenment, 1740-1800

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In order to examine the assertion that there were in Scotland, during the
Enlightenment period, a number of printing and publishing firms to whom
the name ‘scholar-printers’ might be legitimately applied, this paper considers
the history and known output of four outstanding Scottish printing and
publishing firms of the period 1740 to 1800. Four firms were chosen, one in
each of Scotland’s university towns—Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and
St Andrews—both to stress the connexion between scholarly printing and
publishing and the academy, and to underline the difficulties that a provincial
location created for printers and publishers outside Edinburgh. These self-
imposed limitations make it impossible to do justice to the claims of other
firms, such as Balfour and Smellie of Edinburgh, or Robert Urie and Co. of
Glasgow, to be considered ‘scholar-printers’, claims which are certainly not
invalidated by the decision to concentrate on their chief rivals or successors.
The time-limitation, after 1740, also excludes such people as the learned
Thomas Ruddiman, who was conjoint University Printer at Edinburgh from
1728 to 1754, who is the only Scottish printer about whom two full-length
studies have been written (by George Chalmers and Douglas Duncan), and
Robert Freebairn, the Jacobite printer whose spell as Queen’s Printer, begun
in 1711, was sadly interrupted by the 1715 Rebellion and his brief and
inglorious career as the Pretender’s Printer.¹ Both of these men could also
successfully lay claim to the appellation ‘scholar-printer’, and are excluded
here merely because they pre-date the major period of the Scottish Enlight-
enment.

The four firms chosen are: Hamilton, Balfour and Neill of Edinburgh;
Robert and Andrew Foulis of Glasgow; the Morisons of St Andrews; and
the Chalmers family of Aberdeen.

1. Hamilton, Balfour and Neill of Edinburgh’s co-partnership was estab-
lished in 1749. Neill was the printer, and Hamilton and Balfour the bookseller/publishers.

The firm was made Printer to the University in 1754, and the partnership lasted until the retirement of Hamilton and Balfour in 1766. The history of this firm underlines the dual roles played by talent on the one hand, and influence and patronage on the other, in commercial and social advancement in eighteenth-century Scotland. John Balfour was a member of an influential family—the Balfours of Pilrig—and learnt early in his career how to play the patronage game. His partner, Gavin Hamilton, also had powerful connections. John Balfour’s brother was first Professor of Moral Philosophy, and then Professor of Public Law in the University of Edinburgh for a total of twenty-five years. Gavin Hamilton’s father had been both Professor of Divinity and Principal of the University of Edinburgh before 1732. As Warren McDougall puts it in his excellent unpublished Ph.D. thesis on this firm—a piece of scholarship which deserves to see print:

The verve and pugnacity of John Balfour proved useful when employed on behalf of family and firm. In 1754, for example, the Hamiltons & Balfours desired several pieces of Town Council patronage, so John Balfour was lobbed into action like a grenade (he was elected a Merchant Councillor) while Gavin Hamilton’s family marshalled the political forces outside. The strategy worked—the Town Council appointed Robert Hamilton, Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh University, James Balfour Professor of Moral Philosophy, and Hamilton & Balfour Printers to the University and City.

Gavin Hamilton’s career was a varied one for a printer and bookseller. He was admitted burgess and guild brother as a cloth-merchant in 1722, and did not turn bookseller until 1729, combining his early bookselling career with matriculation in Adam Watt’s humanity class. He married Helen Balfour of Pilrig, and started an extensive career in local politics, was a merchant councillor, and served on numerous occasions as a bailie or city magistrate. A staunch Whig, he was forced to leave Edinburgh during the occupation by Prince Charles, and worked on the government side. He was part of the group that engineered the election of his nephew, William Cleghorn, to the Chair of Moral Philosophy in Edinburgh in the 1740s—the group the defeated candidate, David Hume, called ‘a pack of scoundrels’. Hamilton was also the owner, from 1752 onwards, of John’s coffee-house on the north-east side of Parliament Close, a haunt of many of the authors published by his firm, whose bookshop was just across the street from the coffee-house. From 1755 onwards, Hamilton owned and ran a papermill at Bogsmill near Colinton, and from 1761 he had a country estate there.

Hamilton’s career is about as far from the technicalities of the printing shop as that of any university printing patent holder could possibly be. He was essentially an entrepreneur, and like all good entrepreneurs, he and Balfour brought in professionals, in this case the house of Neill, to handle the technical, printing side of the business.

Patrick Neill, a native of Haddington, had learnt the printing trade in the
shop of Murray and Cochran, printers of the *Scots Magazine*. The agreement with Neill was for the printing partnership only. Neill had no share in the profits of the bookselling/publishing business, which was to last from 1749 to 1762.

When Hamilton and Balfour got the city and university printing patent in 1754, succeeding Davidson and Ruddiman, they were required to set up a separate printing-house within the college, and to supply the college library with a free copy of each of the classics they printed. The minute of the Town Council reveals the subtle use made by Hamilton and Balfour, in their petition, of a combined appeal to nationalism, local pride and economic gain:

> observing what benefit might arise to the good town and the country if handsome editions of books that make a figure in this world were printed in this Burgh, [The petitioners] have been at considerable expense for obtaining everything proper for that purpose, and have published a variety of standard books in a manner they were happy to find had met with commendation even in foreign countries where printing has been long in perfection; that the petitioners animated with these successes have of late turned their thoughts towards publishing good editions of the Greek and Latin Classics, and were sensible that if the Council, as patrons of the University, would please bestow on them the office of printers to the University, as it has been enjoyed by others, they would be enabled to print these classics better, and furnish them at easier rates than they could otherwise do, and might save the importations thereof from foreign parts which would be of very great service to the country and keep much money at home.

The claims made by the firm in this petition are substantiated by a consideration of their output, most of which is listed in McDougall’s substantial bibliographical list. They showed, like Urice of Glasgow, an early interest both in selling and publishing French literature, and they published a substantial number of legal, medical and scientific texts. A select list of their authors would include Lord Hailes, Robert Wallace, Thomas Blacklock, John Home, William Wilkie, James Macpherson and Alexander Carlyle—to say nothing of three historians, William Maitland, David Hume and William Robertson. When Hamilton & Balfour were made University Printers, medical and scientific theses approved by the University appeared under their imprint. They made good their promise to produce handsome editions of the classics with a Virgil and a Sallust in 1755, a *Phaedrus* in 1757, and a prize-winning Terence in 1758, which won the Edinburgh Society silver medal for fine printing. Of the books printed in English carrying their imprint, one of the most significant was the Edinburgh Philosophical Society’s *Essays and Observations, Physical and Literary*. They were also the publishers of the first *Edinburgh Review*, in 1755.

It is important to stress that the firm’s principals were not only the printers and publishers of these works. They were also an integral part of the intellectual society from which the works arose. Hamilton was Treasurer of the Royal Infirmary, a director of the Edinburgh Assembly, a director of the SSPCK; one of the managers of the Edinburgh Society for the Encouragement
of Arts, Sciences, Manufactures and Agriculture, and one of the Commissioners appointed for the improvement of streets and public buildings in Edinburgh. He was as much an Enlightenment figure as either the historian and editor, Lord Hailes, or the influential Principal Robertson. If Hamilton spent much less time in the bookselling shop or the printing-house than his counterparts in Glasgow, Aberdeen or St Andrews, or, for that matter, most bookseller/publishers in Edinburgh, he enhanced the public image of his profession in a very significant way.

2. My Glasgow example is, inevitably, the printing and publishing firm of Robert and Andrew Foulis, printers and publishers in Glasgow from 1741 to 1776 and University Printers from 1743 to the same year. The brothers had both been students at Glasgow University, and had received patronage from Francis Hutcheson and other members of the Glasgow professoriate. They had visited Europe in 1738, apparently with a view to qualifying themselves as tutors and teachers. Father Thomas Innes, Head of the Scots College of Paris, and one of their hosts in Paris, wrote about his young Protestant visitors:

They set off chiefly for the Belles-Lettres, and seem to design to be Professors of that, in the University of Glasgow, or perhaps to be governors or tutors to young noblemen, for which last employment they seem to be very well cut out, in their own way, having very good parts and talents, very moderate, and making morality their chief study and application...taking for their guides, among the antients, Epicetetus, Seneca, Cicero’s Offices, among the moderns—de Cambray’s (Fenelon’s) works.  

All the authors listed here were later to be printed and published by the Foulis Brothers, who found their true careers as university printers and publishers.

Andrew Foulis II inherited both the printing skills and the considerable debts of his father and uncle. He managed to hold on to his University appointment from 1778 to 1795 despite considerable hostility in the University Senate. They resented the younger Foulis’s indifference to University interests, and mistrusted, perhaps with some reason, his business abilities.

The Glasgow society which produced these talented printers was similar to that of Edinburgh—although on a smaller scale. Glasgow was the centre of the Virginia Trade, and some of the ‘Tobacco Lords’ were men of wealth and culture who studied commerce as a science. In the period 1740 to 1750, Provost Cochran of Glasgow had encouraged a club for discussing questions relating to trade and political economy, and it was local interest in the ‘dismal science’ that encouraged the Foulis brothers to publish a series of works on economics, such as Child’s A New Discourse on Trade, John Law’s Proposals for a Council of Trade in Scotland, and William Petty’s Political Arithmetic—all in 1751. But the abiding passions of the Foulis brothers were literature and the fine arts. With the wholesale authorial and editorial support of the University of Glasgow professoriate, the bulk of the Foulis Press output consisted of accurate and finely printed texts of the classics of Greek, Latin and English literature. Philip Gaskell’s recently revised standard bibliography
of the Foulis Press shows in its 780 entries the impressive range of the Foulis Press output, both with respect to diversity of subject area, fine paper quality, superior typography, and the occasional use of illustration. These qualities combined to place the Foulis Press in the first rank of British printing and publishing.

In both the Glasgow and the St Andrews text-book printing operations, there was a heavy emphasis on correctness, on the need to use reliable copytexts, and the desirability of stringent proof-correcting and cancellation procedures, leading to published texts which were as immaculate as possible. It was the fame of this range of classics, from Homer down to Foulis's contemporary, Thomas Gray, which encouraged James Boswell, who published two of his own books at the Foulis Press, to dub the Foulis brothers ‘The Elzevirs of Glasgow’, inviting direct comparison with the Leiden family of scholar-printers of the previous century.

Robert Foulis’s 1743 petition to the University of Glasgow is a much more modest document than that of Hamilton, Balfour and Neill to the Edinburgh Town Council. It was addressed to the Rector, to the Principal, to the Dean of Faculty and to the other professors in the University of Glasgow:

The said Robert Foulis hath provided himself with types both Greek and Latin of such exactness & beauty that he can execute printing work in either Language, in such a manner as will be no Dishonour to one who bears the character of University-Printer, & of this he is ready to exhibit Specimens: He therefore humbly petitions that he may be admitted as printer to the University of Glasgow.

On the same day the University, ‘having seen specimens of his printing and found it such as he deserves very well to be encouraged, did chuse the said Robert Foulis into the office of University Printer’. It was a condition of the appointment that Foulis would not use the designation of University Printer in any books ‘excepting those of antient authors’ without permission from the University.

The Foulis Press was also fortunate in that it had first call on the fine Roman and Greek types cast by the Wilsons in their Glasgow foundry, although these types were soon made available to other printers all over Scotland. Despite the Edinburgh location of the aforementioned Edinburgh Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Sciences, Manufactures and Agriculture, the Foulis Press of Glasgow was to win all the silver medals given for printing by that Society, with the solitary exception of that won by Hamilton and Balfour with their 1758 Terence, produced under the superintendence of their brilliant journeyman, William Smellie. The Foulis prizewinners included a Callimachus in 1755; a Horace in 1756; and the impressive folio Homer in 1756 and 1757.

3. St Andrews has a much less comprehensive history as a source of learned printing and publishing in the Enlightenment period. It had but one printer/publisher in the eighteenth century, and that at the very end. The Morison family were University Printers in St Andrews from 1796 to 1800
only, although the firm’s main establishment at Perth prospered from the 1770s to the 1800s. I have been able to trace only slim connexions between this family of Perth printers and the University of St Andrews. Robert Morison, bookseller and postmaster in Perth, the founder of the firm, had married one Margaret Russell, daughter of the minister at Forgan in Fife. Margaret Russell’s mother was Elizabeth Tullideph, cousin of that Thomas Tullideph who was first Professor of Divinity at St Andrews, and later Principal of United College from 1747 to 1777. It may be that Robert and James Morison, the talented sons of Robert Morison, postmaster, owed their university appointment entirely to their known merits as printers of English and Scottish literature. I doubt it, however. As Roger Emerson put it in his paper, ‘The Scottish professoriate in the eighteenth century’: ‘In most university appointments, idealism, jobbery, friendship and malice, merit and birth all played a part.’ I am sure this applied to university printers as well as to professors.

Despite the Morisons’ apparent success as University Printers, it is worth noting that their obvious successor as Printer in St Andrews, Francis Ray, a printer in Edinburgh, St Andrews and Dundee from 1793 to 1811, and a former journeyman employed by the Morisons, preferred to move his own printing shop from St Andrews to the larger, neighbouring town of Dundee. A surviving production from Ray’s own press in St Andrews—John Bucco’s Progress of Education and Manners (1801)—attracted only 26 out of 144 known subscribers for 173 copies, from St Andrews and its university. It is hardly surprising that Alexander Smellie, the son of the erudite William Smellie, is recorded in St Andrews University archives as having turned down an offer of the post of University Printer in St Andrews in 1803. The initial appointment of James Morison as University Printer in St Andrews may well have been ‘faute de mieux’ arising out of adverse market conditions failing to attract a more prominent printer from Edinburgh or Glasgow. The limited size of the bookselling market, in a provincial burgh whose ancient university was just recovering from a period of acute intellectual and economic depression, combined with the reality of increased delivery costs to other, larger markets, may well explain the short career of James Morison as University Printer.

Other factors are attested by James Morison’s unpublished letters to the banker, Sir William Forbes. The House of Morison had seriously over-extended itself financially by attempting to produce in its Perth office, that dream of many scholar-printers—an encyclopedia. The 18-volume Encyclopaedia Perthensis, issued in parts, was finally finished in 1806, but at the cost of James Morison’s physical health, and the ruination of his firm’s finances. James Morison wrote to another (unidentified) potential backer on 13 December 1798:

I have the honour of being Printer to the St Andrews University, where I am printing a very elegant set of Classics—cura John Hunter, LL.D...Naturally of an active disposition, I have for near twenty years, bustled through a good deal
of business in my line—and not without tolerable success, notwithstanding the present application.\textsuperscript{20}

Morison goes on to admit that he had imprudently embarked on several heavy undertakings in addition to the \textit{Encyclopedia Perthensis}, which was itself a constant drain of over £100 a month. The production costs of his 'numbers' edition of Shakespeare had been over £1,000 and the 3000 copies he had produced of a Scottish \textit{Gazeteer} had cost him even more. Morison blames an illness, and his consequent inability to attend to spring sales, for his financial problems, but the core problem was the ambitious over-extension of his publication programme, undertaken from a physical situation in Perth relatively remote from the larger book-buying markets. Nevertheless, the scholarly output of the St Andrews Press was not contemptible. Editions of Virgil, Sallust and Horace, all edited by John Hunter, Professor of Humanity, would surely have challenged the work of the younger Foulis for the Edinburgh silver medals, had that desirable scheme of premiums survived. The attractive illustrated editions of Martine, and Colvil and a presumably pirated edition of Cowper, all produced at the St Andrews printing-office, make an agreeable supplement to the major series of Scottish poets produced by Morison at their main office in Perth.\textsuperscript{21} A pamphlet on Perth publishing, produced 25 years ago, accurately summed up the modest achievement of the Morison Press:

It never pretended to the mass of scholarly work which should issue from a University Press. It never produced anything in folio, and only a few volumes in quarto. Most of the items...are unpretentious little 8vo and 12mo volumes, pleasantly printed in readable type, decorated by the delightful and generous use of ornament in the shape of vignettes and engraved plates.\textsuperscript{22}

4. Aberdeen and its university had a continuous printing and publishing history in the eighteenth century. The Aberdeen University printing appointment was associated with that of the City, which in itself may have induced a higher degree of commercial conservatism in printing and publishing enterprise than in Glasgow or St Andrews. Although its hinterland was greater in size, and the city itself was larger, Aberdeen shared St Andrews's problems of a relatively small local market, and high costs of distribution to the Edinburgh and London booksellers. Aberdeen had, nevertheless, managed to support a continuous line of printer/publishers in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{23} A complete sequence of minutes relating to appointments as Town and University Printer can be found in the Aberdeen Town Council minute books. When Forbes the younger's widow retired as Town and University Printer in 1710, she was succeeded by her son-in-law, James Nicoll; who was, in his turn, succeeded by the Chalmers dynasty, starting with James Chalmers I, who became printer to the town and university in 1736, (and whose father just happened to be Professor of Divinity in Marischal College). James Chalmers II, a Marischal College graduate, was Town and University Printer until 1810. He had trained in his craft with
printing firms in London and Cambridge, and produced output of excellent technical quality. James Chalmers II was succeeded by his son, David, a student under Beattie at Marischal College in 1794.24

Aberdeen, unlike St Andrews, had an active cultural and intellectual life. It was James Chalmers I who brought Andrew Tait, musician, to Aberdeen to help in the establishment of the Aberdeen Musical Society in 1748, a society which consolidated the long-standing pursuit of musical pleasure by the citizens and academics of Aberdeen. James Beattie in his Day-Book, describes James Chalmers II as a moral, genial man, proficient in languages.25

In a paper delivered in Aberdeen, some knowledge of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, and its major contribution, through Gerard, Campbell, Reid and Beattie, to the study of aesthetics and to the philosophy of Common Sense, has been taken for granted. Despite this Aberdeen Enlightenment, it is surprising to find, through a study of its output, that the Chalmers Press was not an outstanding scholarly press in the sense that the Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews examples were. In one of the few articles on Aberdeen printing and publishing, William MacDonald noted that the Chalmers Press was recognised as their official printers by the Town Council, the two colleges and the Commissioners of Supply for the County. While not a monopoly, the Chalmers business was in such a flourishing financial condition that its owners apparently saw little need for the kind of innovative enterprise displayed by Robert Foulis and James Morison. When one reviews the solid, well-printed output of the Aberdeen Press from 1740 to 1800, as was done recently in terms of the British Library holdings, (ESTC), some surprising characteristics come to light. Local history and sermons by local authors dominate the lists, which is no great surprise. There are, however, only limited examples of edited versions of the major classics, and these, mostly of Plato, come from the press of Chalmers’s short-lived rivals, Douglass and Murray. The Aberdeen University philosophers consistently printed their major works in Edinburgh and/or London. Gerard and Campbell, for example, printed at the Chalmers Press only sermons addressed to Aberdeen audiences, and not their major works. Beattie had Chalmers print his list of Scoticisms, and lecture notes for student use. Beattie paid for the paper, and Chalmers for the printing of Ross’s Scottish poems.56 Where Aberdeen editions of classics of English and Scottish literature existed, they were generally from the presses of Chalmers’s chief rivals—Francis Douglass or John Boyle. Books related to the ‘improving’ movement, and chiefly directed at Aberdeenshire lairds, also tended to come from Chalmers’s rivals. There may be a political dimension here, as well as economic and social considerations. Chalmers was a Whig in a society which had strong Episcopalian and Jacobite leanings. Nevertheless, the failure of the Aberdeen philosophers and theologians to use their own university press for their major publications, and to enjoy the obvious convenience of a local press for proof-reading and editorial revision, remains a partial puzzle. The emphasis by Chalmers on newspaper and magazine printing may be one answer; the desire of the Aberdeen philosophers to have their work known outside the local hinterland is obviously another. The contrast with Glasgow is striking.
The four presses I have dealt with have a number of features in common apart from the facts that they operated in university towns, and directed some of their output at scholarly markets. They all participated as well in purely commercial printing and publishing activities, in addition to their university commitments. The Chalmers firm was the owner of a thriving periodical, The Aberdeen Journal, ran book auctions, and did a good deal of jobbing printing for the country booksellers and for the chapbook market. The Foulis brothers also had a stake in a Glasgow newspaper until 1760—The Glasgow Courant.21 Although the Foulis name does not appear in the imprint, the Courant was printed in their printing shop, and was their chief medium for book advertisements. The Morisons did not have a newspaper, but they published a series of short-lived magazines, which carried advertisements on their covers.28 They were deeply involved in the ‘numbers’ trade, printing large books in 4d or 6d parts, or books in series, for the lower end of the bookbuying market. The lack of rival printers of any staying power gave the Morisons a near monopoly on local printing in the Perth area. Hamilton, Balfour & Neill, on the other hand, operated their extensive business in the intensely competitive printing and publishing world of metropolitan Edinburgh, which encouraged them actively to seek publishing business. The Foulis brothers’ involvement in a Fine Arts Academy, and in a peat moss reclamation scheme, were enterprising, though hardly profitable, extensions of their entrepreneurial spirit.29

None of these firms were ‘scholar-printers’ in the exclusive sense of that name, as decisively and correctly associated with the growth of Renaissance learning in such European cities as Venice, Leipzig, Basle, Paris and Leiden. The Virgilius issued in Venice in 1501, and the Herodotus of 1502, are only two of the long series of octavo editions of Latin and Greek classics, prized both for their accuracy and their sober elegance, to come from the press of the Venetian printer, Aldus Manutius (1495-1519), the first scholar-printer. To take another example from the end of the sixteenth century—1583 to be exact—Louis Elzevir, who had learned his trade with Plantin in Antwerp, set up a bookseller’s shop in Leiden. By 1587, he had been given permission to build a shop in the grounds of the university. The Elzevir business continued in Leiden until about 1702; it expanded to The Hague, Amsterdam and Utrecht, and produced over 5,000 books.30 The most highly praised part of this extraordinary output was the series of neat, clearly printed, vellum-bound editions of French and Latin classics of pocket book size (12mo and under). On the evidence of surviving sale catalogues, (e.g. Dumfries House, 7-9) Scottish country house libraries in the first half of the eighteenth century had their due meed of 8vo Aldines and 12mo Elzevirs, and proud parents whose sons were going off to study at the Scottish universities would often make a parting gift of an Elzevir or similar production. The impact of the European scholar-printers on Scottish culture was considerable and their prestige enormous.

In 1817, the Morisons of Perth sold off the books and engravings from the library of William Stewart of Spoutwells, from a 380-page catalogue. The books are listed by short title, and by author and size—but David Morison’s scholarly annotations stress the continuity of fine printing and exact schol-
arship when dealing with the products of both Scottish and European presses. Comments such as that on an Aulus Gellius (Paris, 1521) 'A very rare volume from the celebrated press of Badius' (Spoutwells, 1) are frequent. A copy of Gray's *Poems* (Glasgow, Foulis, 1768) is described as 'one of the most elegant pieces of printing that the Glasgow Press, or any other press has ever produced'. Of his own uncle's 8vo edition of Goldsmith's *History of England* (Perth, 1792), David Morison exults: 'This work is beautifully printed on white wove post, and is considered one of the first productions of the Perth Press.' Morison's head-note on the Elzevir classics in this sale reads as follows: 'The Works published by the Elzevir family have been so long and justly celebrated for accuracy and beauty of typography, that their scarcity and value have become very great.' This can be compared with Morison's head-note for a set of Foulis Press classics in the post-octavo size: 'long and justly celebrated on containing the Text of the Authors IMMACULATE, and printed in a style of neatness and beauty, excelling all other editions, not only in this country, but even those from the most celebrated Presses on the Continent.' These comparisons suggest that what can be found in the best eighteenth-century Scottish printing is both a conscious emulation of the European tradition of scholar-printers, and an extraordinarily successful imitation and extension of that tradition.

**Notes**

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14. Glasgow University Archives, Foulis file, MS 6307.
17. Ibid.
20. Durham University Library, Forbes MSS.
22. Ibid., p.22.
26. Ibid., pp.70, 85, 213.
32. Ibid., p.164.