

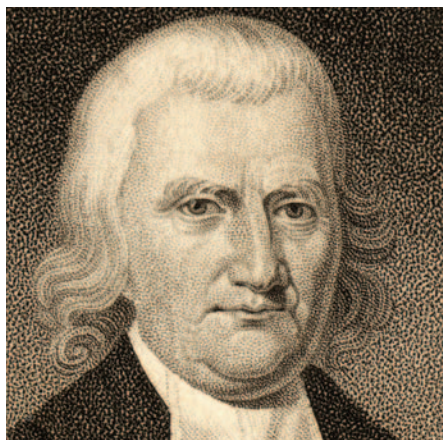
# Princeton's Philosophical Family Ties

by Gordon Graham

Throughout the world the name Princeton has become virtually synonymous with international excellence in higher education, thanks to its university and its seminary. It is generally acknowledged among historians, but perhaps less widely known, that three Scottish immigrants played a central role in bringing this about—John Witherspoon, James McCosh, and John Mackay.



James McCosh



John Witherspoon

In 1768, Witherspoon, with his wife and family, made the somewhat hazardous journey from Paisley in Renfrewshire to become the fourth president of The College of New Jersey. Exactly 100 years later, James McCosh, a native of Ayrshire and graduate of Edinburgh, made the same journey for the same reason. His ambition, which he saw accomplished before he died, was to transform the college into Princeton University. Half a century later, in 1936, John Mackay, a native of Inverness, capital city of the Scottish Highlands, and a graduate of the University of Aberdeen, assumed the presidency of Princeton Seminary. During his tenure, he not only healed the divisions that had put its future in jeopardy, but took it to new heights of theological eminence.

There were two common factors in the educational background of these men. They were all Presbyterian ministers, and they had all studied philosophy in Scotland. That is because, from the establishment of Scotland's first university—St. Andrews—in 1411, every student at the ancient Scottish universities studied philosophy, a unique feature of the curriculum that continued until the 1960s.

Not only did philosophy have a special place in the universities, the universities had a special place in Scottish society. The astonishing result was that this small, poor country on the fringe of Europe, overshadowed in almost everything by the wealth and prestige of the English, French, German, and Italian nations, nevertheless outshone them all in the intellectual accomplishment now known as the Scottish Enlightenment. Between 1700 and 1800, philosophy in Scotland produced some of the greatest and most enduring names in the discipline's history, and laid

the foundations of many of the branches of learning—economics, psychology, politics, and sociology—that are widely acknowledged to be central to the understanding of human life.

## The Scots

Among these eminent names is that of Thomas Reid (1710–96), a Presbyterian minister who taught philosophy first at Aberdeen and then at Glasgow. Reid was widely regarded as the principal author of the “philosophy of common sense.” Like all the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, Reid had been inspired by the empirical science of Newton and Bacon to model moral philosophy along the same lines. But whereas this led David Hume and others into radical skepticism, Reid earned his reputation for being the most cogent defender of morality, religion, and the beliefs ordinary people take for granted. Though the expression “common sense” was often misinterpreted by those who seized on Reid's philosophy with enthusiasm, there is no doubt that for fifty years after his death, his intellectual influence was immense.

But the influence of Scottish philosophy in general was even greater, especially in the emerging educational institutions of the United States. Witherspoon taught philosophy at Princeton before Reid published his major works, and replaced the philosophical school of the great Jonathan Edwards with the tradition in which he had been educated back in Scotland. He set the precedent whereby the president of the college or seminary usually taught philosophy because of its importance in the curriculum, and the textbook on moral philosophy he wrote for his

students was widely adopted and emulated in the many new colleges and seminaries springing up in the South and West.

Like Witherspoon, McCosh, who had left the Chair of Logic and Metaphysics at Belfast to take up his position in Princeton, taught philosophy and continued to do so even when he had retired from the university's presidency. In his last years, he saw the influence of the authors of Scottish philosophy wane, but he played a key part in its preservation when in 1875 he published his book *The Scottish Philosophy*, a study of no fewer than forty-seven Scottish philosophers under a title that brought the name "Scottish philosophy" into existence for the first time.

#### Center for the Study of Scottish Philosophy

In 2004 I was Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen, the latest occupant of a position created in 1505. Building on recent developments there, which had capitalized on the university's possession of Reid's original papers, I established the Centre for the Study of Scottish Philosophy (CSSP). The speed with which the center attracted the enthusiastic support of scholars across the world meant that it was with some difficulty that a year later I contemplated the possibility of abandoning that initiative in order to accept the offer of the new Luce Chair in Philosophy and the Arts at Princeton Seminary. Happily for me, there was the figure of McCosh to come to my rescue. What could be more fitting than to recreate the center in the place where the very expression "Scottish philosophy" had been invented? And so, with the agreement of President Torrance and Dean Guder, and the enthusiastic support of the librarian, Dr. Stephen Crocco, in 2006 this is what happened.

Institutionally, the CSSP at Princeton is located within the Special Collections section of the Speer and Luce Libraries, alongside the research centers devoted to Abraham Kuyper and Karl Barth. So situated, it can benefit directly from the expertise, guidance, and enthusiasm of Dr. Clifford Anderson, the curator of special collections.

But this institutional location is slightly misleading. All three centers are more than special collections of materials. Indeed, the collection of material especially useful to the study of the Scottish philosophical tradition is only just beginning. The activities of the CSSP range much more widely. Under the general oversight of a new advisory board that includes members from Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Center of Theological Inquiry, as well as the Seminary, the CSSP edits the *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* (now published on behalf of PTS by Edinburgh University Press) and sponsors a book series—the Library of Scottish Philosophy—designed to make expertly selected writings by Scottish philosophers widely available to students and the general reader in an attractive and inexpensive form. Some major projects are beginning, including a "new McCosh," a multiauthored history of the Scottish philosophical tradition in four volumes. And an international conference on the theme "Philosophy, Theology, Education: Scottish Foundations of American Traditions" will take place from September 7–9, 2007, at the Seminary's Center of Continuing Education.

In terms of academic research into intellectual history, this is all very exciting, but the Seminary's main function as a place of teaching and learning has not been forgotten. For the very first time (to my knowledge), the M.Div. program—in the spring 2007 semester—includes a course titled The Scottish Philosophical Tradition (PH400). Twelve students (and a visiting scholar) are registered for it. Like all courses at the Seminary it is open to Princeton University students as well, and perhaps in future years, when the word has spread, it will attract some. It is a wonderful bonus for me to be able to offer such a course in addition to the courses in philosophy and the arts that it is my principal duty to provide. And I find it hard not to think that Witherspoon, McCosh, and Mackay would be pleased as well!

As in so many ways, the CSSP is one more initiative in which PTS needs the interest and support of its graduates and friends. Full details of the people, work, and



Thomas Reid



John Mackay



David Hume

plans can be found on the Seminary's web site at <http://libweb.ptsem.edu/collections/scottish>. Participation in the activities of the center is welcomed, as are financial contributions and donations of research materials that will enable us to give the CSSP a long and productive future. ■

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