The Intersection of the Public and Private Lives of British Enlightenment Intellectuals

Jennifer Goetz, 2015

I began my project by asking how Enlightenment scientists and thinkers approached their domestic lives. I sought to explore whether or not scientists married, had children, or included their families in their work. I narrowed my study to the Lunar Society of Birmingham, a philosophical society of notable British chemists, inventors, and industrialists, which included James Watt, the inventor of the steam engine, and Joseph Priestley, the scientist who discovered oxygen. I read the correspondence and memoirs written by the “Lunatics” and analyzed their rhetoric closely. I supplemented this primary research, which included hundreds of letters and several lengthy memoirs, by reading biographies of the prominent Lunar men, modern theories in the history of science, and a wide variety of interpretations of the group’s significance in the British Enlightenment. Attached to this summary is a selected bibliography demonstrating the types of sources I read.

My research uncovered some key themes not currently addressed by historians of science. The Lunar Society was more than just a group of men collaborating in science. I was struck by the tight bonds amongst the men: they were friends with each other and their wives, they borrowed from and loaned money to their fellow Lunatics, and they even intermarried their children. For example, Erasmus Darwin, poet and botanist, wrote to his colleague Josiah Wedgwood about the Wedgwood children, calling them “the fine little Wedgwoodikins,”1 while later requesting ceramic materials for experiments. In another moment the chemist James Keir mixed friendship, work, and family, as he fondly described reading Darwin’s botanic poem to relieve his wife’s toothache.2 Based on my research this summer, I argue that the Lunar Society consciously developed and maintained this complex web of relationships to support their continued productive collaboration. They built and managed a network that advanced their own goals, contributed to society, avoided conflict, and provided financial and emotional support. They blended their various roles as scientists, fathers, friends, and husbands, to their benefit, helping to define and validate the Lunar Society in Enlightenment terms.

After identifying these trends in the Lunar Society correspondence and memoirs, I sought to frame my findings in the greater context of the history of Enlightenment science. My work this summer supports research that shows Enlightenment savants aspired to be social gentleman with a virtuous character. I assert that the Lunar Society thrived under Enlightenment culture due to their ability to manage such complicated networks. Ultimately, their commitment to the Enlightenment ideal of sociability proved to be an essential tool for them in maintaining their science.

In the second half of the summer, I compiled my findings into a 35 page article that included my own primary research and analysis with a brief historiography of relevant works in the field. I thus gained important experience in writing, as well as researching, through my study. While I hope that my work represents an original piece of historical research, the most important aspect, for me, of my work this summer has been learning how to embark on an independent research project. Through this process I have developed my passion for history and increased my confidence in my desire to go to graduate school. This project challenged me to think creatively and to change my perspective on how historians research and write, and I am eager to find more challenges such as these at Bowdoin and elsewhere.

Faculty Mentor: Meghan Roberts

Funded by the Martha Reed Coles Fellowship


