

EDINBURGH SOCIETY OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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It may reasonably be doubted whether any other European capital could boast of a Society more brilliant than that which flourished in Edinburgh during the closing years of the eighteenth century and the opening ones of the nineteenth.

A surprisingly large number of men distinguished in almost every phase of activity of the human intellect were contemporaries in the capital of Scotland from 1780 to 1820.

We may conveniently speak of "the turn of the century" as indicating those last years of the old and the first of the new. Not only was Sir Walter Scott at the zenith of his astonishing productiveness, but Jeffrey was founding *The Edinburgh Review*, Joseph Black, the discoverer of carbonic acid gas and latent heat, was lecturing on Chemistry at the University, James Hutton was enlarging the concepts of geologists by his speculations on the igneous rocks, the second Monro was writing what was to become classic in Anatomy, Sir John Leslie was performing his experiments on the artificial production of cold which brought him European fame, Dugald Stewart in moral philosophy was not only informing but delighting immense classes, Raeburn was covering his canvases with those magnificent portraits which are a joy for ever; Brougham, Campbell,

Carlyle, Sydney Smith, were all still in Edinburgh, and "Rab"—the immortal—, Miss Ferrier and Lady Nairne were all of the group. There was brilliance whichever way one turned, brilliance in Belles Lettres, in Poetry, in Oratory Forensic and Ecclesiastical, in Physical Science, in Medicine and in Medical Jurisprudence.

When we turn to the scientific section of Edinburgh's brilliant society we encounter names which are amongst the foremost in the history of British discoveries in natural knowledge.

We shall first notice possibly the most distinguished, namely Professor Joseph Black, M.D., the discoverer of carbonic acid gas. The eighteenth century was itself just drawing to a close when Dr. Black closed his eyes on all earthly things, for he died on November 26th, 1799. Black was born of Scottish parents in Bordeaux, but he studied in the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, and was finally Professor of Chemistry first at the one and then at the other. Although it is true that Van Helmont of Louvain had referred to what was really carbon dioxide as "gas sylvestre", the very word "gas" having been invented by him, and that the Reverend Stephen Hales had known that certain alkaline salts contained this substance, yet Black was unquestionably the first person to investigate