

*'Intoxicated with this Delightful Performance': The Culture of Critical Reading in
Enlightenment Scotland*

At the beginning of January, 1800, the eldest son of an impoverished Aberdeenshire laird, training for a career in the Scottish law courts, decided to keep a 'Literary Journal' to chronicle the 'course of my reading...and my observations on authors and writings'. Alexander Irvine of Drum explicitly set out to imitate Gibbon's 'account of his regularity in study', and in the range of reading experiences he chronicles over a five-year period the diary sheds considerable light on the history of reading during the Scottish Enlightenment.

The diary acts as a complete register of Irvine's reading experiences at a crucial era in his intellectual and cultural development, revealing the role of classical literature in framing his mind but also the extent to which he became thoroughly immersed in the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment whilst studying at Edinburgh and Glasgow. Indeed, Irvine's immersion in the values and habits of mind propagated by Enlightenment philosophers is fully reflected in the manner in which he sought to read, constantly interrogating his textual authorities, assessing their theories as they fitted with his own observations and proposing adjustments accordingly. The diary is made all the more revealing by Irvine's serial lack of self-discipline as a critical reader. Irvine found himself distracted by company, food, drink and women, not to mention ill health and poor eyesight brought about by candlelit reading, and constantly upbraided himself for not paying enough attention to his intellectual development.

My paper will introduce Irvine's often tortuous literary confessions, assessing their importance not only for our understanding of the social impact of the Scottish Enlightenment, but also for our understanding of the physical, cultural and sociable constraints under which reading necessarily took place in the long eighteenth century.

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