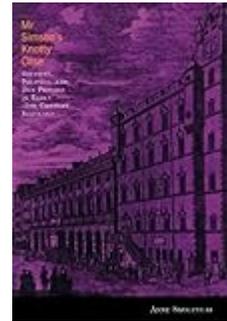




Anne Skoczylas. *Mr. Simson's Knotty Case: Divinity, Politics, and Due Process in Early Eighteenth-Century Scotland.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001. xii + 403 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-1029-6.



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Contesting the Onset of Enlightenment

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John Simson was a fifth-generation Scottish minister, aged just over forty when he was elected professor of divinity at Glasgow University in 1708. In the following twenty years, he was twice formally charged with holding views so unorthodox as to make him unfit to teach. In 1729, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland so far upheld the charges as to suspend him indefinitely from his teaching duties. Simson's case attracted wide notice in the Scotland of his day: the final years of the controversy especially saw an outpouring of polemical pamphlets. It has been cited in many histories of church and religion in Scotland since—judgements as to Simson's orthodoxy or unorthodoxy commonly being colored by the religious views of the author.

In this lucid study, Anne Skoczylas carefully unpicks the various strands of the Simson story, using it to illuminate many aspects of the early-eighteenth-century Scottish scene: developments in religious thought; the institutional and social world of church and universities; and the powers wielded by competing political factions, and their changing cultural strategies. Her exposition is

at all times careful and clear. The main controversialists are lightly but effectively introduced: on the one hand, Simson—forceful, sharp-tongued, but a thoughtful and dedicated teacher; on the other, James Webster, dogged defender of the “systematic” Calvinism developed by mid- and later-seventeenth-century divines against modifications which (in his view) ceded too much to liberal, optimistic, genteel currents of thought swirling into Scotland in the aftermath of the 1707 union of administrations and parliaments. After Webster's death in 1720, no one person so clearly led the anti-Simson campaign, though there remained a diehard “hyper-Calvinist” (or, as contemporaries had it, “high”) party keen to bring him down, as a symbol of much that they found threatening in changing times. The anti-Simson camp was particularly strong in the east of Scotland—perhaps because the strength of episcopalianism there encouraged bristling and aggressive Calvinist reaction. It was also ultimately stronger among laymen than among ministers—lay elders being stirred up by anti-Simson propaganda, and having less ability to grasp the intellectual force of his position.

Skoczylas patiently leads readers through the issues

in dispute and helps them to understand both technically what was at stake and what investments those on both sides had in seeing things as they did. Simson, who had spent time in Holland, at the universities of Leiden and Utrecht, as well as in Scotland, was well aware of broader intellectual trends, not only in divinity but also in natural philosophy. Unimpressed by the pedantic certainties of systematic Calvinism, he preferred to invoke Calvin and the early reformers; the diplomatic loose-phrasing of the 1644 Westminster Confession, and recent writings (notably those of the Dutchman Marck and the Genevan Pictet) shaped by the broader fashion for critical thinking: the works of authors careful not to dogmatize when evidence was lacking, and ready to submit theology to tests of coherence and reasonableness. Simson prided himself on being abreast of modern thought. He liked to cast himself as a Newtonian and his opponents as unwitting Cartesians, exponents of outworn systems whose inadequacies should have been patent. His critics recognized the danger that he might be taken to represent the side of “sense and breeding,” they for their part being stigmatized as “odd out-of-the-way people” (p. 289). Yet in the eyes of these critics, much was at stake. For all that Simson might pretend to stand in a broader orthodox tradition, he was in fact little more than a freethinker with bands on, a closet subversive whose essential unreliability needed to be exposed. Garbled recollections by students whose Latin had probably not been up to the finer points of Simson’s arguments anyway were scabbled together and paraded as evidence of his deviancy.

In Skoczylas’s account, Simson’s intellectual stance, while influenced in part by the broader intellectual climate, was equally or even primarily shaped by the practical demands of teaching. Glasgow had once been famed for passionate Calvinism, but the westwards shift in trade which followed Scotland’s admission to the English imperial trading zone, and the growth of Atlantic commerce, made it increasingly a worldly, mercantile city. Simson’s teaching aimed to equip intending ministers with that mixture of solid learning in the foundational texts of Christianity and independence of mind that he thought they would need if they were to maintain the intellectual credibility of their faith. “Arminian” tendencies in his thinking—his disinclination to believe that God would be quite as choosy as some supposed in his gift of grace—similarly, she suggests, were shaped by his sense of the challenges of effective pastoral ministry. A minister whose stance was too unrelentingly discouraging might find it hard to maintain the confidence and trust of a congregation which had all kinds of other pressures

to contend with; Simson’s disinclination to accept that grace might be bestowed even upon those who had made no efforts of their own to forswear sin was similarly shaped by his appreciation that ministers would find it difficult to promote social discipline if they could hold out nothing by way of incentive to sinners to change their ways.

In politically unsettled times, one possible focus for anxiety was the fear that authority as such might be eroded. This was clearly never Simson’s intent. On the contrary, he was always inclined to court the politically ascendant, shifting from early Squadrone orientation towards the Argyll faction as the latter grew stronger in the course of the 1720s. He was not sympathetic to those—more numerous in England and Ireland than in Scotland—who questioned whether requiring “subscription” to agreed statements of doctrine was compatible with Protestantism and natural liberty. He was impatient with students who agitated for freedom to explore radical ideas and critique authority in informal clubs and fringe theater, and who sought a greater say in university affairs.

Simson was a reasonably adept operator in a highly politicized institutional environment. In the final General Assembly hearings, both Squadrone and Argathelian factions inclined to support him. Yet this proved insufficient. Skoczylas suggests that his suspension was a compromise, accepted by both moderate and hyper-Calvinists because of dangers they could see in continuing to war with one another: precipitating a schism in the Scottish church, and opening the way to English intervention in their affairs.

Some of those who had been Simson’s students lapsed from Trinitarian orthodoxy later in life. Skoczylas judges it implausible that Simson’s teaching was responsible for this; as she notes, most of his students were in that sense plainly orthodox. In other respects, however, she argues that he did shape the views of a new generation: “His modified Arminian view of the atonement, his Shaftesburian moral sense, and his vision of a benevolent creator were widely adopted by the new leaders of the church” (p. 345). In that sense, Simson was a progenitor of Moderatism, of the Scottish Enlightenment, and indeed, of enlightened thought beyond Scotland’s borders: among those he taught was Francis Hutcheson.

The controversy he sparked was itself shaped by, but perhaps also helped to shape, other shifts and developments that prepared the way for the ensuing Moderate era. The Argathelians had been aligned with the hyper-

Calvinists. Argathelian support for Simson in the late 20s was a straw in the wind, revealing Islay's decision to swing Argathelian forces towards the more liberal, "progressive" side (a pragmatic enough choice on behalf of a party currently seized with excitement at the prospect of what they might gain by positioning themselves as Walpole's Scottish partners). Many of the diehards who had opposed Simson, not least because they took him to be a herald of changing times even though they held to the church for a few years after the resolution of his case, opted for secession on the contentious issue of patronage (determination of pastoral appointments by local landowners) in 1733. Their departure fatally weakened the cause of hyper-Calvinism within the church. Indirectly also, thus, Mr. Simson's "knotty case" helped to set the scene for the Enlightenment.

Though there were some common trends evident in early-eighteenth-century Scottish and English political and intellectual life, the institutional and cultural context in which these trends were worked out differed greatly from one to the other, as this account clearly brings out—something not to be overlooked in the rush to create a more integrated "British" history. Skoczylas writes from a good grounding in older and newer writ-

ing on Scottish politics and religious and academic affairs. Her micro-study (not a genre of historiography that has had many Scottish practitioners) illuminatingly demonstrates how in practice these different power systems might interact. Perhaps the most valuable feature of her account, however, is the way in which it brings to life aspects of contemporary intellectual culture not commonly foregrounded in writing on the Scottish enlightenment, which has more commonly focused on developments in natural and moral philosophy.

This study is very firmly set in its time and place: Skoczylas never goes out of her way to note modern resonances. Yet denizens of the modern academy will no doubt be helped in getting their minds round this complex affair by parallels in their own experience. These resonances make the tale of unseemly shifts and expedients employed as academic infighting spilled over into the wider public arena all the grimmer. As Skoczylas notes, a generation earlier Simson's life might have been at stake. In the Walpolean era, it was not. Yet his career ended sadly, as he was shuffled aside with a pension and an aura of infamy about his name, a casualty of early-eighteenth-century culture wars.

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