

ENLIGHTENMENT, EDUCATION AND INDIA: SIR JOHN MACPHERSON AND KING'S COLLEGE, ABERDEEN

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This article explores the connections between the Scottish politician and colonial administrator Sir John Macpherson (c.1744–1821) and King's College, Aberdeen. A native of the isle of Skye, John entered the English East India Company's service in 1769. A member of the supreme council of Bengal, he eventually became Governor-general of India in 1785. Like his friend and kinsman James 'Ossian' Macpherson and his own father, the Rev. John Macpherson of Sleat, John was educated at King's College. The influence of Aberdeen scholars on both men was not only intellectual, but political. Aberdeen provided the Macphersons with powerful networks of Indian patronage. Among John's friends was Roderick Macleod, philosophy professor and sub-principal of King's whose correspondence reveals a common range of colonial and antiquarian interests shared with the Macphersons of Sleat. Moreover, the relations between John's family and subprincipal Dr Hugh Macpherson, also from Skye, exemplify Aberdeen's pivotal role in providing opportunities abroad for families from the western isles.

This article also examines John's neglected role in the foundation of the Inverness Academy. His correspondence contains a real manifesto for exporting human and cultural capital from the Highlands to the East Indies. Partly funded by a group of Highland nabobs in Bengal, the Academy provided education for young Highlanders in a range of topics (language, finance, arts) in order to qualify them for entering universities while offering a secular alternative to the SSPCK. Finally, specific attention is given to John's sponsoring of a scholarship for Gaelic-speaking students at King's, showing the fruitful interactions between Aberdeen, the Gaelic Enlightenment and India in the 1790s and 1800s. Such preoccupations reposition Aberdeen not only as a natural centre for Education, but also as a crucial step towards the participation of the Scottish Highlands to the British Empire in the second half of the 18th century.

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ON 15 March 1798, the Scottish politician Sir John Macpherson received a letter from the antiquarian William Bentham. Bentham, chiefly remembered today for his monumental *Baronetage of England*, wanted to include Macpherson in his prestigious pedigree. At first, the former Governor General of Bengal was reluctant to provide any information on his access to the baronetcy in 1786. He explained to his friends that Bentham was ‘an endless correspondent’ with whom he could only but lose his time. Bentham did not give up and wrote to some of Macpherson’s most distinguished Aberdonian connections. After intense lobbying from John Paton of Grandhome, assessor of King’s College, and Roderick Macleod, sub-principal of King’s, Macpherson finally answered Bentham’s questions shortly after.¹

The new baronet of Calcutta was a prominent actor in the development of the British Empire. Born c.1744/45 on the Isle of Skye, in a family of Highland ministers, Macpherson joined the English East India Company (EIC) in 1767.² A close collaborator of Governor General of Bengal Warren Hastings, he was elected member of the Supreme Council in 1781. Despite this success, his career was tarnished by suspicions of bribery and corruption. His private agency for Muhammed Ali Khan (1717–1795), Nawab (prince) of Arcot and ally of the British, came under scrutiny by the Council for its interferences in transactions between the Company and Arcot, which eventually led to Macpherson’s dismissal. After his reintegration in 1781, Macpherson served as Governor General of India from 1785 to 1786. Eclipsed by his predecessor and his successor, the Earl of Cornwallis, John Macpherson has remained a neglected figure in the history of British India.

This paper seeks to explore the importance of the Aberdeen milieu for the development of Macpherson’s colonial experience. Like his colonial career, John Macpherson’s education at King’s College between 1760 and 1764 has been largely ignored. The few existing studies focus exclusively on his friendship with his famous kinsman, James Macpherson (1736–1796), internationally renowned for his ‘translations’ of Ossian, who also worked as the Nawab’s agent of Arcot.³ These men met on the Sleat peninsula when James visited John’s father, Rev. John Macpherson (1713–1765), a remarkable Gaelic scholar and minister who

1. John Macpherson to Roderick Macleod, 15 March 1800, University of Aberdeen Library; *The New Baronetage of England: Containing, as Well as a Concise Genealogical History, as the Presented State and Alliance of the English Baronets and Baronets of Great Britain* (London, 1804), 775–7.

2. John Macpherson to Martin Macpherson of Golspie, 31 December 1767, cited in Sir Arthur G. Macpherson, ‘Sketch of the Life of Sir John Macpherson Bart.’, no date [1905–1921], unpublished.

3. James Noel Maclean, *The Early Careers of James ‘Fingal’ Macpherson (1736–1796) and Sir John Macpherson, Bart. (1744–1821)* (PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1967); George McElroy, ‘Ossianic Imagination and the History of India: James and John Macpherson as Propagandists and Intriguers’, in Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock (eds), *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment* (Aberdeen, 1987), 363–74; Stephen Foster, *A Private Empire* (Millers Point, 2010).

provided material for *Fingal* and *Temora*.⁴ John and James studied in Aberdeen but previous historiography had more to say on the links between the father of Ossian and his alma mater. The difference in emphasis is principally due to the focus on James's literary activities, to the detriment of his political and colonial career. Fiona Stafford and Dafydd Moore, among others, had uncovered the intellectual influence of the Aberdeen Enlightenment on James Macpherson's poetical and historical works, and more particularly, that of Thomas Blackwell.⁵ Linfield-Ott has offered the first critical examination of James Macpherson's education and corrected a whole series of approximations through a closer examination of archives to which this article is indebted.⁶ However, John's connections with King's College has remained in the shadow of James.

There are indeed grounds for asserting that intellectual achievements in Aberdeen were in fact inseparable from the imperial agenda. Aberdeen is now established as a centre of Enlightenment in its own right, but the tendency remains to ignore the importance of Aberdeen in favour of Edinburgh University, where John Macpherson briefly studied, but not James.⁷ As a prestigious institution with strong connections to continental Europe, Edinburgh played an undeniable role in developing John Macpherson's connections to Enlightenment thinkers and politicians, such as William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, and the Earls of Warwick.⁸ Although dealing with the next generation of Scots in India, Martha McLaren's work is of particular interest here for reconsidering the influence of Edinburgh professors, such as Dugald Stewart, on prominent

4. Fiona J. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988); McElroy, 'Ossianic Imagination', 363–74; James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, in Ronald Black (ed.), *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and James Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (Edinburgh, 2011), 280–1.

5. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, 152–3; Dafydd Moore, 'James Macpherson and Adam Ferguson: An Enlightenment Encounter', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 24, 2 (1997), 5–23; Thomas A. McKean, 'The Fieldwork Legacy of James Macpherson', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 114 (2001), 454; Dafydd Moore, 'The Ossianic Revival: James Beattie and Primitivism', in Ian Brown (ed.), *Enlightenment, Britain and Empire (1707–1918)*, *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 2007), 90–8.

6. Thomas Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (London, 1894), 39–42; Kristin Linfield-Ott, 'See Scot and Saxon Coalesc'd in One': *James Macpherson's 'The Highlanders' in Its Intellectual and Cultural Contexts, with an Annotated Text of the Poem* (PhD Dissertation, University of Saint-Andrews, 2011), 20–2.

7. Carter and Pittock (eds), *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment*, 1–6.

8. Jeffrey R. Smitten, *The Life of William Robertson: Minister, Historian and Principal* (Edinburgh, 2018), 226; Moore, 'James Macpherson and Adam Ferguson'. On Ferguson's interest for the Highland of Scotland, and his knowledge of the Gaelic, see Denise Testa, 'A Bastard Gaelic Man': *Reconsidering the Highland Roots of Adam Ferguson* (PhD Dissertation, University of Western Sydney, 2007) and Stefanie Metze, *An Imperial Enlightenment? Notions of India and the Literati of Edinburgh, 1723–1791* (PhD Dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 2011).

Scottish colonial administrators.⁹ It is therefore no surprise that the correspondence between John Macpherson and prestigious Scottish professors, such as Adam Smith, mentioned politics and patronage. Nevertheless, the focus on ‘prestigious’ relations is very telling on great ideas to the detriment of what has appeared for a long time as the more practical, almost trivial business of imperial politics. Despite his extensive treatment of the Macphersons’ careers in India, James Noel Maclean’s dissertation, like Bailey Saunders’s biography of James Macpherson, downplayed the importance of Aberdeen.¹⁰ This article argues that previous focus on Edinburgh distorted the imperial perspective and obliterated the importance of Macpherson’s alma mater.

Moreover, the case of John Macpherson offers an occasion to explore the relatively neglected connections between the North East of Scotland and India. Alistair Mutch, Hanna Hodacs, and Kitty Datta are all pioneers in that respect. Mutch has explored the career of the EIC officer Patrick Duff of Carnousie, from Banffshire, while Hodacs has worked on the Aberdeen merchant Charles Irvine’s connections to Asian trade and the Swedish East India Company, in particular.¹¹ Datta’s research on Sir James Mackintosh has revealed the influence of Aberdeen Enlightenment on his Indian political and judicial activities, and in forging a common interest in India among students and staff.¹² Despite his involvement in the creation of the Asiatick Society of Bombay, in which the impact of Aberdeen and ‘conjectural History’ could be felt, the case of Mackintosh differs from John Macpherson in terms of politics and ideology. While Mackintosh’s whiggish ideas made him progressively alien to King’s official ideology at the time of the French Revolution, John Macpherson espoused the social conservatism of the institution. Both men shared similar preoccupations with British imperial military culture in India but offered two different ideological responses to the transformation of the Scottish Highlands in general.¹³

This article demonstrates that Macpherson’s connections to Aberdeen were manifest in two ways. On the one hand, King’s functioned as a seminary for the Empire by educating human capital for export to India. Macpherson himself was the product of a colonial, outward-orientated education which opened numer-

9. F. P. Lock, ‘An Unpublished Letter from Adam Smith to Sir John Macpherson’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 85 (2006), 135–7; Martha McLaren, *British India & British Scotland, 1780–1830: Career Building, Empire Building, and a Scottish School of Thought on Indian Governance* (Akron, 2001), 65–6.

10. Maclean, *The Early Careers*, 34–6; Saunders, *The Life and Letters*, 39–42.

11. Alistair Mutch, *Tiger Duff: India, Madeira and Empire in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Aberdeen, 2017); Hanna Hodacs, ‘Keeping It in the Family: The Swedish East India Company and the Irvine Family, 1731–1770’, *Journal of World History*, 31, 3 (2020), 567–95.

12. Kitty Datta, ‘James Mackintosh, Learned Societies in India, and Enlightenment Ideas’, in Carter and Pittock (eds), *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment*, 40–51.

13. Onni Gust, ‘Remembering and Forgetting the Scottish Highlands: Sir James Mackintosh and the Forging of a British Imperial Identity’, *Journal of British Studies*, 52, 3 (2013), 615–37.

ous opportunities for young graduates from the Highlands and the Western Isles. On the other hand, King's was also a natural place for colonial networking and patronage. This article also focuses on the educational role of King's for John Macpherson, who maintained special links with Aberdeen patronage and the Gaelic language while serving in India.

In doing so, what follows makes extensive use of Macpherson's correspondence. The core material for this paper comes from the Macpherson collection (Mss Eur F291) held at the British Library in London. Composed primarily of letters, administrative records, and miscellaneous publications arranged by Macpherson himself for his own use, it remains only partially accessible to researchers. To reconstruct Macpherson's correspondence network, the unpublished biography of Sir John written by a family member, Sir Arthur G. Macpherson (1828–1921), who served as judge at the Calcutta High Court at the end of the nineteenth century, has therefore been particularly useful. The typescript contains large quotations from letters which have been either lost or are now unavailable to the public.¹⁴ In addition to Maclean's dissertation, mentioned above, another compendium of information is the meticulous work of Prof. Alan G. Macpherson (1927–2018), who consulted the Macpherson collection before its transfer to the British Library. His notes and transcriptions are now kept at the Highland Archives Centre in Inverness (GB0232/D1304). Collections from the University of Aberdeen Library have also been of peculiar interest.

Macpherson and King's College: The Hebridean Dimension

When Macpherson arrived in Aberdeen in 1761, Marischal and King's were two separate institutions which had undergone a drastic reform to ensure their allegiance to the Crown.¹⁵ John Macpherson's experience as a student was typical in many regards. He studied at King's for four years and graduated in 1764, according to the matriculation album.¹⁶ James and John Macpherson did not study at the same period, and Aberdeen played no direct role in their encounter, as noted earlier. However, the strong ties that both men maintained with Aberdeen professors and students were key in shaping their political trajectories.

John Macpherson followed the family tradition and opted for Divinity.¹⁷ His studies were funded by the Synod of Glenelg on the express condition that

14. I am very grateful to Mr Nicholas Smith for providing me with a copy in his possession.

15. Paul B. Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment: The Arts Curriculum in the Eighteenth-Century* (Aberdeen, 1993), 12.

16. 'Joannes Macpherson, Invernessensis, Frater Martini (m, Edin.)': Peter John Anderson, *Roll of Alumni in Arts of the University College of Aberdeen 1596–1860* (Aberdeen, 1900), 82.

17. Rev. John Macpherson received a degree in Divinity in 1728 and was ordained in 1734. He became doctor in November 1761. His son Martin, John's elder brother, also studied Divinity

grantees would enter the ministry afterwards. After his graduation, John did not follow his father's example and years later, in 1799, was asked by the Synod to reimburse the loan.¹⁸ Such sponsorship was particularly common and facilitated the important influx to King's of students from the Western Isles, often associated with Presbyterianism. It was also part of the attitude adopted by the Scottish Society for the Preservation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) towards the West and East of Scotland, where the Catholic and Episcopalian presence was not negligible. Bursaries allocated to the sons of Gaelic-speaking ministers demonstrated a wish to reinforce Presbyterian belief through ministerial training in English.¹⁹ John Macpherson, however, benefited from a relative open-mindedness regarding his native tongue, as shown by the SSPCK's pragmatic toleration of Gaelic-speaking prayers in congregations.

The transformation of King's and Marischal into 'Hanoverian' institutions was significant for John, who came from a Presbyterian family on good terms with Jacobite families.²⁰ Despite the reforms, there was a strong Highland network in Aberdeen among university staff and students. King's was a place where Presbyterian and Gaelic-speaking communities from the West of Scotland could reconnect very easily. A rapid look at the graduation rolls shows that the Hebrides were particularly well represented. As one might expect, Divinity attracted many graduates from the Western Isles. For the year 1764, nearly 30 per cent of Macpherson's fellow graduates were from the Highlands, and the Hebrides, in particular. In addition to his own brother Martin (1743–1812), who later become minister in Sleat, John Macpherson had at least five classmates from Harris and Skye.²¹ Many of them were already acquainted with his own family prior to his arrival. John Macaulay, minister of South Uist and close friend of Rev. John Macpherson, also sent his sons to Aberdeen at the same time.²²

and became a Church of Scotland minister: Peter John Anderson (ed.), *Officers and Graduates of University and King's College, Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1893), 101, 114.

18. Showing no irritation, Macpherson paid the requested sum of £82. John Macpherson to the Synod, dated 1799, cited in Dòmhnall E. Meek, *Os Cionn Gleadhraich Nan Sràidean: Taghadh De Sgrìobhaidhhean Gàidhlig Thòmais MhicCalmain*, Scottish Gaelic Texts Society (Edinburgh, 2010), 93; Maclean, *The Early Careers*, 95–6.

19. Jamie J. Kelly, *The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge: Education, Language and Governance in the British State and Empire, c.1690–c.1735* (PhD Dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2020).

20. Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment*, 12. This was also visible in terms of religious affiliations, and King's was originally Episcopalian: Christine Shepherd, 'The Arts Curriculum at Aberdeen at the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century', in Carter and Pittock (eds), *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment*, 151.

21. Among those who studied at the same time were Aeneas and Roderick Macleod, Donald MacKinnon, and Norman Macleod: Anderson (ed.), *Officers and Graduates*, 243–4.

22. 'In the distribution of the Collections made for Highland Students you will see justice done to our young Folks': Rev. John Macpherson to John Macaulay, 15 May 1762, National Library of Scotland, MS 2958.

King's was also a perfect place to connect with gentry families beyond the Hebrides, and especially those from Aberdeenshire and the wider North East, as the examples of the Turnbull of Dalladies from Forfar and the Patons of Grandhome suggest.²³

Roderick Macleod and the EIC

The convergence between commerce, trade, and geography in Aberdeen was already well established at the time of John Macpherson's studies. Some of these lifelong connections between Skye and Aberdeen were maintained in Bengal. A good example is provided by Macpherson's association with Rev. John Bethune (1751–1815). Before emigrating to North Carolina as chaplain to the 84th Regiment of Foot, then creating the first Presbyterian church in Montreal, Bethune grew up in Brebost, near Portree, in a family of ministers trained in Aberdeen. Bethune studied with Macpherson, who described him in his correspondence as his 'worthy school fellow'.²⁴ Much later, in 1803, Bethune solicited Macpherson's help in obtaining a writership in the EIC for his son. Arguing that he could no longer interfere with appointments after his resignation, Macpherson contacted a prominent member of the Aberdeenshire gentry, and an alumnus of King's, Major-general Alexander Mackenzie Fraser, who was then serving in India.²⁵

At King's, this Highland network relied much on its principal, Roderick Macleod of Talisker (1727–1815). When John was a student at King's, Macleod had been regent for nearly twenty years and had established relevant channels to be able to offer places to students from the Highland and Islands, and particularly, from his native Skye.²⁶ John Kay, in his humorous sketch depicting eight

23. Entries in Aberdeen rolls list 'Alexander Turnbull de Dalladies et Cassindonald' being granting doctor of law in 1781, the same year as John Macpherson, 'armiger in Magnae Britanniae comitiis unus ex populi delegatis et in Supremo Bengalae apud Indos Consilio Senator, hujus Academiae alumnus' ('founder of the Macpherson Bursaries'): Anderson (ed.), *Officers and Graduates*, 112. John Macpherson's friend cited above, John Paton of Grandhome, had one son who worked in Bombay. See Alexander Macdonald Munro (ed.), *Records of Old Aberdeen MCLVII* (Aberdeen, 1899), 314–5.

24. Richard B. Sher, 'Bethune, John (1725–1774)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edition, 2004), available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/65001> [Last accessed 7 October 2024].

25. John Macpherson to General Alexander Mackenzie, 7 January 1803, University of Aberdeen Library, Papers of the Fraser family of Castle Fraser, MS 3470/6/1/589. The recommendation is probably for his elder son, Angus Bethune, who later became chief factor of the Hudson Bay Company.

26. Roger L. Emerson, *Professors, Patronage and Politics: The Aberdeen Universities in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1991), 137–8; Charles W. J. Withers, 'Highland Migration to Aberdeen, c.1649–1891', *Northern Scotland*, 9 (1989), 26–7.

prominent figures from King's, represented Macleod wearing a Highland dress with the following comment: 'annually for 45 years and upwards have I beat up even to the Ultima Thule have I recruited our University' (Figure 1).²⁷ Military connotations, such as the reference to the army's right to 'beat the drum' for recruits, confirm the interpenetration of Highland militarism and university education. Both from Skye and both sons of Presbyterian ministers, Macleod and Macpherson shared similar geographies and interests. Historical and topographical considerations pervaded their correspondence, in which Macpherson showed a very convincing knowledge of his native area.²⁸ Macpherson's letters to Macleod demonstrate that the former's connections with North East Scotland did not end with his departure in 1764 and continued until Macleod's death in 1815.



Figure 1. John Kay, 'The Sapient Septemviri', catalogue number ABDUA:30603 in University of Aberdeen Museums and Special Collections, is licenced under CC BY 4.0.

Recommendations of Aberdeen alumni flowed in letters to Macpherson, in which Macleod took advantage of the former's personal memories of King's.

27. Emerson, *Professors, Patronage and Politics*, 98. In Latin, *Ultima Thule* refers to the most remote part of the ancient world.

28. John Macpherson to Roderick Macleod, 15 March 1798.

In a context of global competition and imperial endeavours, patronage relied heavily on interpersonal networks and geographical proximity. This was clear in the recommendation of a young man called Angus McNielsen, 'that you might have seen at Aberdeen along with young McKinnon', Macleod reminded his correspondent. He probably referred to a Mackinnon of Strath, a family of ministers from Sleat, like John Macpherson himself.²⁹ Family and clan connections were also visible in Macleod's recommendation of a namesake, the 'Laird of Mackinnon who is getting to India'.³⁰ The most plausible candidate is Charles Mackinnon, 18th Laird of Mackinnon (c.1752–1796) who was, like Macleod and Macpherson, a native of Skye. Charles's maternal uncle was John Macleod, 11th Laird of Raasay, while his father, John 'Dhu' Mackinnon, had his estates forfeited following his involvement with the Jacobite army in 1745.³¹ A correspondent of Adam Smith, Mackinnon published a rather eclectic digest of existing Enlightenment theories applied to East India Company revenue and administration. His work even included a defence of the authenticity of Ossian, based on his knowledge of Gaelic.³² Mackinnon's discussion of revenue-making in post-Mughal India would have been ideal to attract the attention of John Macpherson, who occupied an influential position at the Madras presidency at that time.

The role of King's in promoting students for imperial careers increased when Macpherson became Governor General in 1785. In September 1787, Roderick Macleod reminded his 'affectionate cousin' of his personal ties to King's and their mutual obligations:

If you are disposed to enquire about College matters, our Friend Fingall [James Macpherson] can inform you. If you see the Treasurer of the Navy our Minister for Scotland [Henry Dundas] and as we are told for India it would be a good thing to put in a word for your poor old *Alma Mater* though I hope he is in no great danger. Our friends In Skye are all well,

29. John Macleod to John Macpherson, no date, British Library, Macpherson papers, Mss Eur F291/209.

30. John Macleod to John Macpherson, 20 August 1787, British Library, Mss Eur F291/209.

31. Charles Fraser-Mackintosh, *Antiquarian Notes, Historical, Genealogical, and Social* (Inverness, 1897), 277.

32. Charles Mackinnon, *Essays on the Following Subjects; Wealth and Force of Nations, Authenticity of Ossian, Accompaniment, Existence of Body, Fortification, Battle* (Edinburgh, 1765). When visiting Skye in September 1773, Boswell commented on the young man's intellectual pursuits: 'I was told [the Laird of Mackinnon] had a great knowledge, and hurt himself by too much study, particularly of infidel metaphysicians. I had a small specimen of his improvement in that way when I spoke of the second sight. He immediately retained some of the flimsy arguments of Voltaire and Hume against miracles in general. It was strangely offensive to hear infidelity from a Highland chief.' Black (ed.), *To the Hebrides*, 9 September 1773, 154–5.

my Brother in great health and spirit labouring at roads and the Laird of Harris dong great things in fisheries harbours and has MacKinnon been to call on you?³³

This tour around EIC circles effortlessly jumped from Aberdeen to London, from the local to the global, the Highlands and Islands to India. It further demonstrates Macpherson's political geography, which merged British and Scottish politics, improvements and Empire, education and land management.

Company Business and College Politics

Macpherson's association with King's through EIC patronage paved the way for his direct involvement in the administration of the college. This became even clearer following his election as rector in 1795, which offered him an official foothold in the institution.³⁴ King's expected a lot from Macpherson's integration into London politics to maintain its position. When Divinity professor George Campbell died in 1796, after years of retirement, Macpherson interceded with Henry Dundas on behalf of Roderick Macleod, who wished Campbell's pension to be reverted to the college.³⁵ The government pension of £300 a year remained largely unpaid at Campbell's sudden death. The plan of transferring the money to the college over ten or twenty years appealed to Macleod, who worried about the state of the college's finances.³⁶ However, despite his efforts, the project failed, following Dundas's refusal to endorse it.³⁷

Macpherson's presence in King's can also be understood in the context of the general evolution of university patronage. The choice of chancellors in the 1780s and 1790s reflected the intrusion of the EIC into elections. Among the successful candidates was David Scott of Duninald [Dunninade], an East Indian merchant from Angus, who acted as EIC director and rector of King's in 1801–1805. As a 'free' merchant avoiding restrictions by working through the Dutch VOC, Scott challenged the monopoly of the Company. This might explain

33. Roderick Macleod to John Macpherson, 20 September 1787, British Library, Mss Eur F291/209.

34. Emerson, *Professors, Patronage and Politics*, 96.

35. Sir Walter Farquhar to the Duke of Gordon, 13 April 1796, and John Macpherson to Roderick Macleod, 10 August 1796, Aberdeen University Library, MSK 261/1 – MSK 261/2. Macpherson also received support from his friend Adam Ferguson.

36. Jeffrey Mark Sudeman, *Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: George Campbell in the Eighteenth Century* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 56; William Grant to Roderick Macleod, 24 January 1808, University of Aberdeen library, MSK 261/2; Roderick Macleod to Henry Dundas, 7 January 1808, MSK 255/42/5.

37. John Macpherson to Roderick Macleod, 26 April 1796, MSK 261/1.

why Macpherson's friends Paton of Grandhome and Sir William Bannerman supported another local Aberdeen candidate, Alexander Burnett, Laird of Kemnay.³⁸ The EIC coterie, reinforced by Macpherson's prestige as former governor general and backed by the Duke of Gordon and Dundas, was superior. In 1798, another candidate withdrew his candidacy in favour of Macpherson, whom he considered 'far better fitted for the service'.³⁹

External Capital, Education and the Arcot State

Furthermore, King's College benefited greatly from Macpherson's activities in India and his association with Muhammed Ali Khan, one of Britain's most powerful allies. The Nawab's greatest impact on King's was financial. Situated in South East India, the Arcot state was a strategic place for trade, contacts, and conflicts between the Mughal states, the British, and the French since the seventeenth century. It was an unstable and potentially dangerous contact zone on which European trade was heavily dependent. The Nawab's fragile authority counterbalanced the influence of European powers and his southeastern enemies, such as the sultan of Mysore, Hyder Ali, and the Raja of Tanjore.⁴⁰ As a member of the Supreme Council of the EIC and the Nawab's agent, John Macpherson played a key role in the margins of legal actions to ensure the preservation of the Arcot state and the Madras presidency. To increase the Nawab's revenue and the Company's cash, a system of taxation of lands and loads was created, directly administered by rulers of post-Mughal states. The Nawab borrowed heavily from Company servants to pay back the Company's expenses for paying troops.⁴¹ Recent scholarship has considerably reevaluated the Nawab's political abilities and demonstrated that he successfully acquired a stronger importance in the politics of the Company by alienating a large group of agents who, in return, received huge sums of money.⁴² Unsurprisingly, the court of Directors strongly disapproved of these arrangements secured by private assignments with Euro-

38. Burnett served as rector of King's from 1787 to 1801, only interrupted by Macpherson's short years in office. King's professors to David Scott, 20 April 1798, University of Aberdeen Library, MSK 261/1; Anderson (ed.), *Officers and Graduates*, 16.

39. William Scott to Roderick Macleod, 30 April 1798, Aberdeen University Library, MSK 261/1.

40. P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires* (Oxford, 2005), 53–4.

41. John D. Gurney, *The Debts of the Nawab of Arcot, 1763–1776* (PhD Dissertation, Oxford University, 1968); James Robert Philips, *The Development of British Authority in Southern India: The Nawab of Arcot, the East India Company and the British Government, 1775–1785* (PhD Dissertation, Dalhousie University, 1983).

42. P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1976); Christopher Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1998); Pimmanus Wibulsilp, *Nawabi Karnataka: Muhammed Ali Khan in the Making of a Mughal Successor State in Pre-Colonial South India, 1749–1795* (PhD Dissertation, University of Leiden, 2019).

pean creditors.⁴³ Macpherson's nomination as governor general pinpoints the dependence of the British state on the finances of the Carnatic Sultinate and the blurred lines introduced between public administration and private interests.

When Macpherson resigned from his governorship, he left £18,000 in Carnatic stock managed by London-based bankers and then transferred to his trustees.⁴⁴ This considerable sum enabled him to leave an original mark on King's after his death. In his will, Macpherson offered a bursary, bearing his name, for the support of a Highland student during his curriculum of arts in King's College. The university's senate thought that the initial annual bequest, £80 per annum, was a 'sum ... too large in proportion to the expense of living and of education in Aberdeen'. King's modified Macpherson's plan, which was to help as many students as possible every year, and decided to divide it into four stipends over four years. Moreover, his generosity was not limited to Aberdeen. A one-year bursary of £96 per annum was arranged by Macpherson after his death for a student from the University of Edinburgh. The recipient should be a 'native of the Highlands' who could 'understand the Gaelic language'.⁴⁵ Interestingly, like the Aberdeen bursary, this grant did not take the form of a donation *per se*, but of various bonds placed with the Company and benefiting from very profitable growth rates. Representing '4 per cent [of the] Carnatic stock', this generous sum came directly from Macpherson's agency for the Nawab of Arcot.⁴⁶ In both cases, Macpherson's Indian-derived grants were meant to last and secure the advantageous position of Highlanders and islanders in Scotland's educational system. His testament reveals his high consideration for the preservation of a strong imperial–Skye connection, and the extent to which it relied on the promotion of Gaelic-speaking students.⁴⁷

The intellectual influence of Macpherson's agency was also felt in King's through his scholarly interests. Himself a speaker of Hindi and Persian, a regular attendee at the Nawab's *darbar* (court), John Macpherson had direct access to Persian literary production in official or even dubious circumstances. In 1779, he gifted manuscripts to his alma mater: one in Sanskrit and one in Persian, alongside a document stolen in Mangalore 'when that City was taken by the India Company's forces, from the celebrated Hyder-Ali, in 1768.'⁴⁸ This political deci-

43. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires*, 232–4.

44. John Gordon (ed.), *The New Statistical Account of Scotland by the Ministers of the Respective Parishes, under the Superintendence of a Committee of the Society for the Benefit of the Sons and Daughters of the Clergy*, vol. 12 (Aberdeen, 1845), 1155.

45. Gordon (ed.), *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. 1, 768.

46. The full value of Macpherson's Carnatic money amounted to £2500, with interests. *Ibid.*, 768.

47. National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/1641/213.

48. Faculty Minutes, 5 July 1779, University of Aberdeen Library, Kings/1/1/12. See also P. J. Anderson, *Historical Notes on the Libraries of the Universities of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1893), 14, and James Roy Pickard, *A History of King's College Library, Aberdeen, until 1860, Part 3, 1700–1799*

sion showed Macpherson's positioning of Aberdeen as a depository for 'Orientalist' knowledge, since the provenance of these documents reflects the political and religious diversity of the Indian subcontinent.

Through such transfer of material culture, Macpherson wanted students to acquire a more direct knowledge of India in anticipation of a career overseas. At King's, former students involved with the EIC contributed to the creation of knowledge circulating between South Asia and Europe for the purposes of commerce and expansion. A graduate of King's, Alexander Gerard (1728–1795), was a surveyor in Bengal and a noted Persian scholar, topographer, and botanist.⁴⁹ His grandfather, who studied Divinity at King's with Rev. John Macpherson of Sleat, had a strong impact on defining Aberdeen's syllabus after the '45.⁵⁰ Gerard's involvement in the creditors' system of the Mahratta territories put him in an ideal position to provide King's with subsequent manuscripts and information. Heavily influenced by his agency for the Carnatic Sultinate, Macpherson's donations demonstrate that students were exposed to competing visions of British India.

In addition to the three manuscripts highlighted above, Macpherson included an original letter from the Nawab of Arcot to Warren Hastings, 'to give the students a more perfect Idea, of the Paper, writing and correspondence of the East':

I cannot but add that the Nabob is considered, even in India, as the most classical writer of the Persian language, and as he honoured [me] with an uncommon Degree of his confidence and friendship, I have a particular pleasure in depositing with my much-respected Alma Mater this little Testimony of my Reverence and Gratitude to both.⁵¹

In providing King's with extracts from the Nawab's correspondence, Macpherson hoped to convince future recruits of the military and company establishment in

(Aberdeen, 1982), 251. Information on the 'Persian manuscript' is too limited for precise identification, and the 'Canaree' manuscript might have been produced in Kanadaa, the official language of the Carnatic Sultinate. The Sanskrit book is described as 'a copy of the Gentoe Shastor' and might be similar (if not identical) to the *Dirm Shashter*, *Bedang Shashter*, or *Neadrisen Shashter* presented to the British Library by James Macpherson's close friend and EIC servant, Alexander Dow, in 1768. The Shastah or Shashter was a religious treatise often described as the 'Gentoo Bible'. For the significance of these manuscripts in the consolidation of EIC knowledge, see Jessica Patterson, 'Forging India: East India Company Servants and the Construction of "Gentoo"/"Hindoo" Scripture in the 1760s', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 44, 1 (2021), 77–100. I would like to thank the staff from Aberdeen University Library for their assistance in identifying the manuscripts.

49. 'Gerard, Alexander (1792–1839)', in Ray Desmond (ed.), *Dictionary of British and Irish Botanists and Horticulturists, Including Plant Collectors, Flower Painters and Garden Designers* (London, 1994), 275.

50. Anderson (ed.), *Officers and Graduates*, 101; Alexander Gerard, *Plan of Education in the Marischal College and University of Aberdeen, with the Reasons of It* (Aberdeen, 1755), University of Glasgow Library, Sp. Coll Mu32-h.9.

51. Faculty Minutes, 5 July 1779, University of Aberdeen Library, Kings/1/1/1/12.

India of the centrality of Britain's alliance with the Carnatic Sultinate. These donations confirm Macpherson's role in the shaping of the cultural politics of Empire, as shown recently by Joshua Ehrlich's exhumation of his correspondence with the scholar and Calcutta judge Sir William Jones.⁵² They also reveal Macpherson's wish to extend the influence of his alma mater to southern India, and Arcot, in particular.

The 'Skye' Macphersons in Aberdeen

Macpherson's testament also shows the great extent to which King's was present in his personal business and the importance of his Skye kin network in the development of the institution. Apart from the Bristol-based merchant William Wraxall and the solicitor Richard Lowndes, Macpherson's executors were all EIC officers connected to Skye and Aberdeen, such as Lieutenant Colonel John Macgregor Murray (1745–1822).⁵³ Although born in Perthshire, Macgregor Murray married into the Macleods of Bernera, the family of John's mother, and acted as trustee to the Macdonalds of Sleat. Working closely with Macpherson during his governorship, he played an active part in the Highland Society of London, through which he raised funds for a Gaelic edition of Macpherson's Ossianic poetry.⁵⁴ John Macpherson also designated his maternal uncle, Colonel John Macleod (1766–1851) of the 78th Highland regiment, son of the 'Old Trajan,' Donald Macleod of Bernera (1692–1781), and trustee for the estates of the Earls of Breadalbane. John Macleod's half-brother was Alexander Macleod, with whom John made his first journey to Madras in 1769.⁵⁵

Interestingly, the last executor mentioned was Dr Hugh Macpherson of Golspie (1767–1854), the son of a Church of Scotland minister from the Hebrides. A third cousin of John Macpherson, Hugh had developed an early friendship with the Macphersons of Sleat.⁵⁶ He became professor of Greek literature at King's before being appointed sub-principal in 1817.⁵⁷ His second marriage, to

52. Joshua Ehrlich, 'Empire and Enlightenment', *The Historical Journal*, 62 (2019), 541–51.

53. National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/1641/213.

54. Sir John Sinclair, *A Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (London, 1806), appendix, ccxxiii–ccxxxiv.

55. National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/164/213. See also Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Macleods, with Genealogies of the Principal Families of the Name* (Inverness, 1889), 253; Norman Macdonald and Cailean Maclean (eds), *The Great Book of Skye, from the Islands to the World: People and Place on a Scottish Island*, vol. 1 (Portree, 2014), 371–2.

56. Following the premature death of his father, Hugh found in the house of Martin Macpherson, John's brother, a second home. See Maclean, *The Early Careers*, appendix 6, 539–40, and *Inverness Courier*, 23 March 1854, 4.

57. Papers of Dr Hugh Macpherson's family, University of Aberdeen Library, MS 3350. See also Emerson, *Professors, Patronage and Politics*, 97, and Anderson (ed.), *Officers and Graduates*, 43–4. Through his personal and political alliance with Henry Dundas, the Duke of Gordon's influence extended to the wider colonial scene, in the Atlantic and in India.

the daughter of Roderick Macleod, and the purchase of the Eigg in the Inner Hebrides reveal the family's remarkable ability to preserve its territorial power in Skye and intellectual influence in Aberdeen through imperial connections.⁵⁸ Macpherson, like Macleod, regularly gave advice on education to his Skye friends.⁵⁹

For the Skye Macphersons, the Presbyterian ministry in the West of Scotland developed imperial networks which, through Aberdeen, further extended to London and India. Bengal was, therefore, a natural destination for Dr Hugh Macpherson's sons, who served in the army and the High Court of Calcutta.⁶⁰ When establishing John's pedigree, Hugh claimed, without further evidence, that John's father 'was a lineal cadet in the male line of the chief of the Macphersons and all other branches of the clan *catti'*, thus connecting Sir John to the prestigious clan Macpherson in Badenoch.⁶¹ Nearly all of his property and papers passed on to Hugh following Sir John's death in 1821, which shows the latter's confidence in the Aberdeen Macphersons.⁶²

A New Education for Company Recruits

However, while maintaining traditional forms of education, John Macpherson also understood the need to provide the Highlands with a more direct and effective channel to Empire. In addition to the bursaries, he was active in the transformation of education in Scotland in the 1790s. His patronage of the Inverness Royal Academy was influenced by his own experience in King's, as a graduate student transferring to the EIC service. The grammar school, opened in 1792, offered a high-quality education for Highland pupils who could then enter prestigious institutions, such as Aberdeen. This orientation was reflected in the choice of headmasters among natives from the *Ghàidhealtachd*.⁶³ The list of the subscribers, who raised the comfortable sum of £6,000, was dominated by West India merchants and a large group of residents in Jamaica. In 1810, an important donation was received from Scottish plantation owners of Jacobite

58. Gordon (ed.), *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, 151.

59. Roderick Macleod to Alexander Macallister of Strathaird, 11 November 1793 and 6 April 1803, Aberdeen University Library, MS 2118/1-2.

60. Papers of Dr Hugh Macpherson, University of Aberdeen Library, MS 3350. See also 'Macpherson, Dr Hugh', in Macdonald and Maclean (eds), *The Great Book of Skye*, vol. 3, 267-9.

61. Copy statement of the pedigree of John Macpherson, 1786, Inverness Archives Centre, Alan G. Macpherson papers, D1304/2/1/1/5.

62. John Macpherson to Dr Hugh Macpherson, after 1800, D1304/2/1/1.

63. Robert Preece, 'Alexander Nimmo: Rector of Inverness Royal Academy', in Noel P. Wilkins (ed.), *Alexander Nimmo's Inverness Survey and Journal, 1806* (Dublin, 2011), 13-29; David Alston, *Slaves and Highlanders* (Edinburgh, 2021).

ancestry, such as Phineas Mackintosh of Drummond, Hugh and James Fraser of Belladrum, civil commissioners in Denemara, and Colin Macrae of Inverinate.⁶⁴ The committee was less successful when approaching people associated with the EIC. James Macpherson, for example, left the letter unanswered.⁶⁵ In contrast, John Macpherson responded positively and gained support from ‘[his] Highland Friends in the East’.⁶⁶ He successfully secured sponsorship from Sir Hector Munro of Novar (c.1725–1806), a commanding officer in India whose family originated from the parish where Dr Hugh Macpherson’s father was minister.⁶⁷

Macpherson’s response to the school committee was a manifesto for exporting human capital from the Scottish Highlands to the Empire. The emphasis was put on the importance of linguistic dexterity gained through the teaching of grammar, as well as ‘English pronunciation between English and Scots phrases and idioms, and the meaning of words as they are pronounced in both countries.’ India was perceived as a natural destination for graduates, who could become ‘good accountants and copiers, and secretaries to officers on public service at home and abroad.’⁶⁸ In addition, Macpherson successfully drew the Lord Provost’s attention to specific subjects, such as navigation, French, and drawing.⁶⁹

Macpherson’s correspondence gives some elements to understand how he saw the relations between the Inverness Academy and the formal university training that King’s College could offer. Contrary to other subscribers with clear Atlantic-centred preoccupations, Macpherson did not conceive of the Academy as a preparatory class for a university degree only. For him, it constituted an alternative solution to increase the numbers of Highlanders entering the Company’s service: ‘if it is attempted to make it a *half-College* and *half-Academy* Institution it will not succeed in either line.’⁷⁰ In his mind, the Academy was not in competition with the grammar school in Inverness, which was ‘sufficient to qualify young gentlemen for the Colleges of Aberdeen and St. Andrews, for the first steps to the Kirk and Scots Law, and Physic.’ In contrast, by focusing on languages, numeracy, and literacy, the Academy emerged as a ‘technocratic’ institution facilitating access to imperial service.

64. Douglas Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750–1820* (Manchester, 2020), 205–6.

65. S. Karly Kehoe, ‘From the Caribbean to the Scottish Highlands: Charitable Enterprise in the Age of Improvement, c.1750–c.1820’, *Rural History*, 27 (2016), 48.

66. John Macpherson to Provost Mackintosh, 23 March 1789, quoted in C. F. Mackintosh, *Letters of the Two Centuries, Chiefly Connected with Inverness and the Highlands, from 1616 to 1815* (Inverness, 1890), 313–5.

67. Gordon (ed.), *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, 31–2.

68. John Macpherson to Provost Mackintosh, 23 March 1789.

69. The final curriculum was the following: English (1st year), Latin/Greek (2nd year), arithmetic and writing (3rd year), navigation, natural and civil, and natural philosophy (4th and 5th years).

70. John Macpherson to Provost Mackintosh, 23 March 1789.

Macpherson's sponsorship of the Academy was more than the continuation of Roderick Macleod's recruiting activities, for it challenged existing pathways to education, and especially, SSPCK schools. Having benefited from a bursary from the Synod of Glenelg that he had to reimburse, Macpherson was well placed to know that education at King's, as in other Scottish universities, was very expensive for a minister's son of relatively modest origins:

The great advantages of such an institution are to qualify gentlemen's sons who have no property to earn their bread by embarking the world in line in which persons who know themselves to be born of good families may work with the pen, the pencil, and the sword for support.⁷¹

In that regard, the academy that Macpherson helped to establish offered an alternative to the traditional means of funding, which were at the mercy of Presbyterian synods. The Inverness Academy was meant to constitute a less expensive choice than the first years of university training.⁷² Moreover, while the West India merchants were interested in promoting purely commercial training, Macpherson's experience made him aware of the specific administrative and fiscal skills required for a more efficient revenue collection in Bengal.

Gaelic: A Gateway to Empire

Furthermore, the role of Macpherson in the preservation of Gaelic is not to be underestimated. Before his death, in 1817, Macpherson had already given the sum of £2,500 to King's as a fund for Gaelic-speaking students only.⁷³ The same strategy was used by a wider Highland lobby established in London and further demonstrates that Macpherson's association with Aberdeen is inseparable from his London network. John Macpherson was one of the first members of the Highland Society of London, which promoted the establishment of Gaelic schools outside the Highlands and played a key role in the creation of the Inverness Academy.⁷⁴ As a native speaker, born in a family of Gaelic scholars, John Macpherson had a strong interest in the preservation of the language as a cultural asset and marker of origin for imperial patronage. As Charles Withers has noted, many

71. Ibid.

72. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World*, 205.

73. National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/1641/213; David Ditchburn, 'Educating the Elite: Aberdeen and Its Universities', in Patricia Dennison and Michael Lynch (eds), *Aberdeen before 1800* (East Linton, 2002), 340.

74. Katie McCullough, *Building the Highland Empire: The Highland Society of London and the Formation of Charitable Networks in Great Britain and Canada* (PhD Dissertation, University of Guelph, 2014), 408–15.

counties in Scotland had seen a huge decrease in Gaelic throughout the century.⁷⁵ Its importance was less about the number of Gaelic speakers among the enrolled students than the ability of individuals associated with Bengal to be promoted in different circles and networks of sociability in Scotland, London, and India.

In a system of patronage which relied heavily on family and kinship ties, Gaelic was a strong cultural and social marker within the East India Company and the British army. Colonial administrators from the Hebrides were aware of the importance for young people to 'get a better hold a Galic than any of our Chieftains have had for three generations backwards', as Macpherson's cousin John Macleod put it.⁷⁶ Similarly, in his correspondence with Macpherson, Rev. John Bethune made extensive use of Gaelic expressions. These were a nod to their common origins and put him on equal footing with his famous correspondent, 'one of the Rulers of the great Indian Empire'.⁷⁷ Gaelic also enabled Highland officers to communicate confidentially in a language unknown to their English or Scottish colleagues, as is shown by the example of the correspondence exchanged between James and John Macpherson.⁷⁸

At a time when James Macpherson's *Ossian* shaped the military culture of the rehabilitated Highland soldier, the Gaelic distinctiveness facilitated, rather than impeded, global and colonial endeavours, and educational opportunities. Largely developed in networks associated with the defence of *Ossian*, 'Highlandism' could only be fully apprehended through its imperial function. This interest in cultural projects, rather than formal education, was shared by the members of the EIC interest. In January 1787, a group of 'Highland Worthies' in India raised £200 to help defray the costs of a publication of a defence of the authenticity of James Macpherson's *Ossianic* poetry. The subscription list mentions 53 military officers who constituted a 'Highland interest' within the EIC and a large number from the Western Isles.⁷⁹

King's positive response to *Ossian* further demonstrates the centrality of the Gaelic Enlightenment in shaping the College's imperial and military ethos. The Lochaber-born librarian to King's, Ewen MacLachlan (1775–1822), was a noted Gaelic scholar who published a transcription of the book of the Dean of Lismore, one of James Macpherson's sources for *Fingal*. Initially a teacher at the grammar school in Aberdeen, he served as Gaelic secretary to the Highland Society of Aberdeen before being appointed by the Highland Society of London to com-

75. Charles W. J. Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland, 1698–1981: The Geographical History of the Language* (Edinburgh, 1983), 117–37.

76. John Macleod to John Macpherson, British Library, Mss Eur F291/209.

77. John Bethune to John Macpherson, 27 December 1783, British Library, Mss Eur F291/86.

78. Mss Eur F291/122–126.

79. Sinclair, *A Dissertation on the Authenticity*, ccxxiii–ccxxiv.

plete a Gaelic dictionary.⁸⁰ The letters of Ewen MacLachlan reveal the importance of Gaelic and education in his kin-based imperial network, especially in his correspondence with his father and his brother Alexander, a sugar planter in Jamaica.⁸¹ MacLachlan's acquaintance with John Macpherson has not been established, but it is probable, both being the products of the Aberdeen Enlightenment.⁸² His familiarity with Gaelic scholarship placed him in a good position to promote Gaelic studies at King's.⁸³

Beyond his association with the Highland Society, the transition of MacLachlan to the Inverness Academy further demonstrates the importance of Gaelic in raising the general profile of the institution. In addition to his Gaelic proficiency, MacLachlan was approached to teach Classics at the school.⁸⁴ Supporting Ossian, at a time when Sir John Macpherson was governor general, reinforced a common sense of Highland identity cemented by a largely reimagined Gaelic culture rooted in Ossian. The militarisation of the Gael constituted a defensive model against Jacobinism in the 1780s and 1790s, especially in Aberdeen.⁸⁵ At a time when the reformist movements inspired by the American and French revolutions challenged the existing structures of power and representation, colonial figures from the Western Isles like John Macpherson offered a powerful response.

80. P. J. Anderson, 'Ewan Maclachlan: Librarian to University and King's College, Aberdeen, 1800–1818', *Aberdeen University Library Bulletin*, 18 (Aberdeen, 1918); *A Dictionary of the Gaelic Language Comprising an Ample Vocabulary of Gaelic Words*, two volumes (Edinburgh, 1828), and the transcript made by Ewen MacLachlan of the Book of the Dean of Lismore, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS.72.3.3.

81. University of Aberdeen Library, MS 3274, Ewen MacLachlan papers; D. S. Thomson, 'Unpublished Letters by the Poet Ewen MacLachlan', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 11, 1 (1966), 219. Letters also shows his strong ties to a local gentry based in the North East of Scotland, such as the Camerons of Balvenny.

82. 'Report of the Progress of the compilation of the Gaelic Dictionary to Henry Mackenzie, chairman of the Highland Society, letter to Rev. Donald Macleod', 9 June 1817, Aberdeen University Library, MS 3274. MacLachlan was patronised by the Duke of Gordon and received the help of two strong Ossianic enthusiasts, Henry Mackenzie and Sir John Sinclair. See *ibid.*, 205, 209, and Rev. John Sinclair, 'Some Letters from the Pen of Ewen MacLachlan, 'Old Aberdeen'', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 16 (1891), 122–47. MacLachlan's friendship with the Macleods from Harris is also telling of their common geography and networks.

83. Ewen MacLachlan to Donald MacLachlan, July 1811, published in Thomson, 'Unpublished Letters', 210–2.

84. His patronage by Alexander MacDonell of Glengarry, who left the Highland Society to create the rival Society of the True Highlanders, probably explained that outcome. See E. M. Barron, 'Ewen MacLachlan and Inverness Academy', *The Celtic Review*, 8 (1912), 22–48, and Thomson, 'Unpublished Letters', 235.

85. Andrew Mackillop, 'Riots and Reform: Burgh Authority, the Languages of Civic Reform and the Aberdeen Riots of 1785', *Urban History*, 44, 3 (2016), 402–23.

Conclusion

By focusing on John Macpherson's relation to his alma mater, this article has repositioned Aberdeen as a natural place for exporting human capital to the imperial theatre. Through its high number of Highland students, North East Scotland was as important as Edinburgh to the development of Scottish society's place in Britain's expansion in India. Aberdeen was a pivotal point for reconnecting Highlanders with other parts of Scotland, including the Hebrides, and King's College provided Macpherson with relations he would cultivate all his life. EIC connections allowed many Macphersons to play a prominent role in the history of King's College in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century.

In Aberdeen, a more military-orientated approach to education functioned as a platform for the Highland gentry. As an EIC servant, MP, and major colonial figure of eighteenth-century India, John Macpherson offers a fascinating insight into the practicalities of university education in the North East of Scotland and its interactions with colonial power. By re-examining the similarities and peculiarities of Aberdonian academic life, this article has claimed that King's represented for John Macpherson a crucial backstory in his colonial career, providing him with networks and connections with the Highlands of Scotland and beyond.

Moreover, Macpherson's association with the Nawab of Arcot had shed a new light on King's College and the benefits it derived from Empire. The activities of the EIC emerge as a significant factor in the intellectual, political and social development of Scottish universities in the late eighteenth century, and Aberdeen, especially.⁸⁶ Furthermore, by using Gaelic as a springboard for securing studentships, John Macpherson and Roderick Macleod successfully maintained their grip on the institution. Nevertheless, Macpherson's participation in the promotion of Gaelic raises further questions on the practice of Gaelic among the student population. This invites us to consider how linguistic deftness was transposed into the imperial scene with a new sense of confidence and performative identity, in which King's College played its part.

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86. Andrew Mackillop, *Human Capital and Empire: Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British Imperialism in Asia, c.1690–c.1820* (Manchester, 2021).