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James, Duke of York and Albany (and court culture in Edinburgh)

JUILLET-GARZON Sabrina



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Abstract

This entry explains how the stay of James, Duke of York and Albany, and his court in Edinburgh (1679-1682) changed some of its forms of sociability. Indeed, it refashioned a royal court in the Scottish capital at a time when the merchant class had come to be the elite.

James of York and Albany came with his family and court to Edinburgh for two stays between 1679 and 1682, which radically changed the structure and the manners of society there. The Scottish capital had not hosted any royal court since the visit of Charles I in 1633 for his coronation. Since then, the social structure of Edinburgh had changed considerably. A new elite had appeared, composed mainly of traders and merchants. With the trade charter given by James VI & I on his departure for England in 1603, Edinburgh had indeed increased both its trading rights and city boundaries, expanding its commercial perimeter to the Canongate and down south past the Grassmarket. This increased the revenues of both the merchants and the town, allowing for the collection of extra taxes from trade. Edinburgh grew richer. The merchants had now enough money and influence to buy seats at the Town Council. They financed urban improvements and renovated their lodgings. For instance, they were the driving forces behind the new and more or less successful water supply systems, which aimed to improve health, hygiene and fire protection. This new elite encouraged the modernisation of the town for their own interest, their personal comfort and their commercial profit. Their trade business depended on the wealth of their clients. The richer the latter were, the better.

However, the departure of the Stuart court for England deprived Edinburgh of its wealthiest clients. Those who stayed in Scotland or eventually came back, such as the well-off aristocracy, the members of the Parliament or the Magistrates, would live in Edinburgh only during winter months or when on duty. The tradespeople considered it an economic necessity to keep these rich families longer in town. To turn Edinburgh into a safer and more comfortable town was a way to convince the latter to remain there all year long. However, the aristocracy remained at bay, reluctant to live in the city or too attached to their land. Thus, progressively, Edinburgh society reorganised itself around this new elite composed mainly of tradesmen. With the aristocracy, they were all-powerful when James of York and Albany arrived with his court in 1679. On his arrival, Edinburgh's society and forms of sociability were profoundly altered.

Prince James, Duke of York and Albany, was sent to Scotland by his brother, Charles II, in October 1679, because of his declared Catholicism. Since the prince was facing controversies with the Parliament in England regarding his right to succeed his brother on the throne and as the Head of the Church of England, Charles believed that a short exile in Edinburgh would soothe the situation. The Duke arrived in Edinburgh on November, 24th. 117 people came with him to Scotland¹ among them his wife, Mary Beatrice. He was later joined by his daughter, Lady Anne, in July 1681. He returned briefly to London from February to October 1680. When the Duke arrived in Edinburgh, the country was dealing with Covenanters' rebellions. These radical Presbyterians were refusing to swear allegiance to the king's authority on the Church and kept holding illegal conventicles. The capital city was witnessing trials and executions. Indeed, since the Reformation, the Scots had been attached to their religious autonomy and could hardly bear the idea that their Church was ruled by a king from England. The Church of Scotland was independent and had to remain so. Moreover, the departure of the Stuarts for England created among them the feeling that they had been

abandoned by their kings. The arrival of the prince resounded as the beginning of a new era: a sort of reconciliation with the Stuarts. James being a Catholic was not perceived as a threat. He would even be considered by some loyalists as a guarantee that he would not interfere in the religious affairs of the Kirk. As a way to reinforce his position as a tolerant prince, the Duke annulled all the death penalties for the Covenanters, presenting this decision as a royal pardon. He meant to prove that the monarchy was back in the Scottish capital.

The Duke established himself at Holyrood Palace. The fact that his court moved in with him or lived in the vicinity played a central part in the promotion of the royal authority and patronage. The courtiers recovered their traditional status as the town's elite and became the examples to follow, while the social and political lives of the higher classes revolved around them. They all demonstrated their loyalty to the king by honouring the Duke's person. As Duke of Albany, the prince had officially a legitimate political status in Scotland, although this title was honorific and came with no estates or land. In fact, he had obtained no personal privileges or revenues from it either. However, he took his mission as the representative of the king in Scotland very seriously, attended every single meeting of the Scottish Privy Council and intervened in Parliament. He also became a cultural and intellectual patron, launching several institutional schemes, and thus participated in moulding Edinburgh's society.

The Duke recreated a royal court society that was to remind the population of the old times. The face of royal Edinburgh started to change. Robert Mylne, the royal mason, along with Sir William Bruce, were to redesign Holyrood Palace for more comfort. Their work was so successful that the Town Council contracted Mylne to work on the reconstruction of buildings along the High Street (the Lawnmarket, Mylne Court, 1688). The aristocracy immediately followed suit. Queensberry House (built in 1681-1685) is one of the best examples of the architectural trend of that time. Whole blocks of older buildings were demolished on the High Street, from the Canongate to Holyrood, and replaced by manorial properties with gardens or large buildings – lands – composed of several flats with aerated courtyards.

The Duke also promoted intellectual life in Edinburgh as his brother did in London. He hosted intellectual meetings at Holyrood to debate on scientific improvement, especially in medicine, and promoted science by supporting the establishment of the *Royal College of Physicians* in 1681. He became its patron by attending its meetings and supporting the institution financially. Thus he was a major actor in the emergent reputation and influence of Edinburgh's academic institutions of medicine and surgery. James also helped in the foundation of the *Library of the Faculty of Advocates*, established in 1680. Sir George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh, who considerably enlarged the collection and was elected dean in 1682 as an acknowledgment of his involvement by his fellow Lord Advocates.

With the Duke of York and Albany's stay, Edinburgh had definitely become an equal of London in matters of sociability and science. The culture of aristocratic royalism and learning he introduced was at the origin of a new interest in genealogy and history.² This fashion led to the creation of [Scottish antiquarian societies](#). In this context, the prince motivated the foundation and activities of loyal organisations such as the *Royal Company of Archers*, which had been created in 1677 but had had difficulties to find legitimacy, and the *Order of the*

Thistle, which became officially a royal organisation in 1687, after the prince had become king under the name of James VII of Scotland. His actions in favour of the people and the city of Edinburgh gave him such a good reputation that a copy of the *London Gazette*, reprinted in Edinburgh on January 1681, reported that the Duke considered the nobility and the merchants of Edinburgh as being indeed loyal to him, to the royal cause and to his authority.³ The capital city of Scotland had recovered its status of royal burgh, which had seemed forgotten.

As for the manners of Edinburgh's upper class, they mirrored those of Whitehall. Suddenly, there were more theatre plays, dancing and games in the evening in the Palace or at private houses. Edinburgh became a fashionable place for entertainment. Even Dryden came north to perform a play. The Duke's court also directly influenced some models of sociability such as the women's meetings at tea-tables (Ouston 270-272). These were models already in use in England in the higher echelons of society at the time. For these Edinburghers, imitating the royal court was another way to show their loyalty to the Duke and the King as well as a way to show the world that society in Edinburgh had reached the same level of sophistication as in London.

James of York and Albany had succeeded in recreating unity around the monarchy by the trust he managed to restore among the aristocracy and the gentry in Edinburgh, who both lived at the rhythm of the court. The new models of sociability, based on the needs of the merchant class, seemed to have faded away. For about two years, the society's rules and manners in Edinburgh recalled with some nostalgia those before the departure of the Stuarts in 1603. This was a short-term illusion. As soon as the Duke of York and Albany and his court left after their two-year stay, the remaining aristocrats lost their fashionable points of reference and much of their support, while the new elite, formed by the gentry, of whom most were now tradesmen, recovered its power. This paved the way for a different society and sociability in Edinburgh, based on new rules and new models that were to reveal themselves during the Enlightenment.

1. Records of the Town Council, 26 December 1679 Calendar State Papers, Domestic Series, 1619-1625, 1623-1625, 1625-1649, 1649-1660, 1661-1668, Charles II, 1660-1685; James II, 1685-1688. Edinburgh Town Council Archives, 1329-1929 Edinburgh (Scotland). Town Council ngIf: 1929.

2. Alastair Mann, *James VII Duke and King of Scots* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2014).

3. Hugh Ouston, 'From Thames to Tweed Departed': The court of James Duke of York in Scotland, 1679-82', in E. Cruickshanks (ed.), *The Stuart Courts* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 266-277.

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[James in Scotland \(1679\)](#)