

The Society of Arts and Government, 1754-1800

Public Encouragement of
Arts, Manufactures, and
Commerce in Eighteenth-
Century England

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THE FOUNDATION AND SUPPORT of “Oeconomical Societies”—as of artistic and scientific academies, hospitals, universities, botanical gardens, and other public, civic, and royal amenities—was a feature of the international culture of the “Enlightenment.” At Philadelphia and at St. Petersburg, in German princely states and in the free city of Hamburg, in Dutch and Swiss towns, and in French and even Spanish provinces organizations were set up to stimulate industry and agriculture by means of monetary grants, honorific awards, and the diffusion of knowledge.¹ Though Italy and France could claim the lead in scientific and artistic foundations, it was to the British Isles, first to Dublin and after 1754 to London, that the nations looked for models of these new institutions.

“The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, instituted at London, Anno. MDCCLIV” was admired in its early years by British and foreign observers who were struck by the coincidence of its existence and the growth in the wealth and power of the nation which had fostered it. Nineteenth-century writers noted the discrepancy between the value of the Society’s early re-

This article is substantially the same as the paper read at the Anglo-American Conference of Historians, University of London, July 1972, under the title of “Public Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in Eighteenth-Century England.”

¹ There is a considerable literature on the individual societies; the following cover the areas mentioned: S. W. Fletcher, *The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture* (Philadelphia, 1959); J. A. Prescott, “The Russian Free (Imperial) Economic Society, 1765–1917,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (hereafter *JRSA*), 114 (1965), 33–37; R. Rubberdt, *Die ökonomischen Sozietäten* (Würzburg, 1934); H. Hubrig, *Die patriotischen Gesellschaften des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Weinheim, Berlin, 1957).

wards (sums distributed to individuals rarely exceeded two figures) and the extent of the economic developments it claimed to have produced. The institution survived and flourished, in changing forms, during Victoria's reign, and inevitably its domestic chroniclers gave the most favorable interpretations to its eighteenth-century exertions. Historians at large had little to say about an organization which seemed no part of the main stream of political or even economic history and were confused after 1908 when the Society was granted the prefix "Royal."² When period specialists began to focus their attention on the Society's early history in our time the old battle of "optimists" and "pessimists" was resumed. Bowden was full of praise but Ashton saw the Society's awards as "small bait." Hudson and Luckhurst's 1954 history naturally strove to stress the Society's successes, and Smelser, writing soon afterwards, saw the Society as an initiating agent in industrial change and dismissed as irrelevant "many of the criticisms of the Society's effectiveness, as well as belligerent assertions of its practical value."³ The series of monographs, "Studies in the Society's History and Archives," have corrected and expanded Hudson and Luckhurst in a number of ways, and have led to further research into the ramifications of the Society's early membership, in which R. E. Schofield played a pioneer role. The extensive range and variety of the Society's eighteenth-century premium lists, with their six categories of "agriculture," "chemistry," "colonies and trade," "manufactures," "mechanics," and "polite arts," continue to invite attention and to repay (as Gittins showed in the case of potash and Harley over the surveys of counties) the effort of closer investigation.⁴ In the intangible area of the communication of scientific and

² For an example of extravagant praise at home see *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 3rd ed. (Dublin, 1786), XVII, 587; for foreign praise see below. Histories of the Society written by members of its staff include S. T. Davenport, *The Society of Arts Past and Present* (London, 1869); H. B. Wheatley, "The Society of Arts," *Engineering*, 51 (1891), 83–86; and Sir H. T. Wood, *The History of the Royal Society of Arts* (London, 1913). An outstanding case of confusion between the Society of Arts and the Royal Society can be found in J. Newman, "The Enigma of Joshua Steele," *Journal Barbados Museum and Historical Society*, 19, No. 1 (1952), 6.

³ N. J. Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution: An Application of Theory to the Lancashire Cotton Industry 1770–1840* (London, 1949), pp. 82–85; the bicentenary history was D. Hudson and K. W. Luckhurst, *The Royal Society of Arts, 1754–1954* (London, 1954). See also W. Bowden, *Industrial Society in England Towards the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1925), pp. 40–44; T. S. Ashton, *The Industrial Revolution, 1760–1830* (London, 1948), pp. 13, 21, 62, 128.

⁴ The "Studies" have appeared regularly in the Society's *Journal* since 1958; see

technical knowledge and the contribution that this made to the Industrial Revolution (subjects illuminated in recent years by Eric Robinson and A. E. Musson) the early history of the Society of Arts is clearly important.⁵ The present article is concerned with reevaluating the relationship between the Society of Arts and the institutions of government in the eighteenth century.



In 1786 Sophie von La Roche visited the Adelphi in London and went into ecstasies of Anglomania over what she termed the “Voluntary Society for the Improvement of Agriculture and the Arts.” “What thousands of people have been encouraged,” she wrote in her diary, “since a fine, upright man of the name of Mr. Shipley founded the Society. A large picture runs the whole round of this honourable and esteemed society’s conference hall . . . depicting all the labours and activities of mankind . . . My heart was big with blessings, and tears of joy filled my eyes at the list of the many names to which rewards had been given for improved methods of cultivation or invention of tools.”⁶ “Le Citoyen Chantreau,” as he subsequently called himself, came to the Society of Arts in 1788 and marveled that such an institution was founded not by those who held the reins of government but by William Shipley, “cultivateur modeste,”—a man he had never seen mentioned in biographical histories, which, he averred, dealt only with Jesuits or Virtuosi.⁷ Speaking at the annual distribution of awards in 1797, Samuel More, the Secretary of the Society, admitted that its “liberal way of conducting . . . Business” had “impressed on the minds of Foreigners a high degree of veneration.” On a similar occasion in 1818 Arthur Aikin, a later secretary, observed that

in particular D. C. Coleman, “Premiums for Paper: The Society and the Early Paper Industry,” *JRSA*, 107 (1959), 361. R. E. Schofield, “The Society of Arts and the Lunar Society of Birmingham,” *ibid.*, pp. 512, 668; L. Gittins, “Premiums for Vegetable Alkali—the Society and the Supply of Potash, Barilla and Kelp, 1758–1827,” *ibid.*, 111 (1963), 577; J. B. Harley, “The Society of Arts and the Surveys of English Counties,” *ibid.*, 112 (1964), 43, 119, 269, 538.

⁵ See A. E. Musson and Eric Robinson, *Science and Technology in the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester, 1969), *passim*.

⁶ C. Williams, trans., *Sophie in London, 1786* (London, 1933), p. 161.

⁷ P. N. Chantreau, *Voyage dans les trois royaumes d’Angleterre, d’Ecosse et d’Irlande* (Paris, 1792), pp. 174–79.

the remarkable difference between the literary and scientific institutions of England, when compared with those of the continent of Europe, is, that the former have arisen from, and have continued to be supported by, the voluntary exertions of individuals, liberal of their time, their talents, and their money, for the public good; whereas the latter have been, for the most part, produced under the fostering influence of their respective governments, and continued to derive from the state most of the funds necessary for their support.

He went on to praise

the founders of this Institution, who, in proposing to themselves and to their successors so vast a range as the commerce, the arts, the agriculture, and the manufactures of the country, forebore to circumscribe it within the bounds of even the most liberal charter that the munificence of the Sovereign could bestow.⁸

From the vantage point of the 1860s Mr. Gladstone declaimed the saga of the Society's origins:

It was . . . in a dark period that the founders of this Society set themselves to their work; and those who now contemplated with admiration the immense developments which this age had seen, and who regarded with confidence the future progress which would be achieved (because in these developments was contained the promise of the future), must not forget through what difficulties in their early stage, those developments were accomplished. . . . He might also notice, especially with reference to the presence of so many of their foreign friends, that it was to no patronage, to no countenance of the state, to no large profusion—indeed, to no application, whether large or small, of the public treasure, that this Society owed the means by which it had achieved this work. It had been from the first—in its infancy, in its youth, and in its maturity—the spontaneous offspring of private intelligence, and had reflected in its proceedings, as a voluntary institution, all the features of the English character.⁹

More surprisingly, this view is reiterated in the bicentenary history of the Society where a tradition of “sturdy independence” is offered as a corrective to the *étatisme* of mid-twentieth-century Britain.¹⁰ Yet

⁸ Royal Society of Arts Archives (hereafter RSAA), Samuel More, MS “Address”; Arthur Aikin, *An Address Delivered on the 20th of May, 1818, at the Annual Distribution . . . of . . . the Society of Arts* (London, 1818), pp. 4–5.

⁹ Report of speech at annual dinner of the Society of Arts, 1862, *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 10 (1862), 504.

¹⁰ Hudson and Luckhurst, *Royal Society of Arts*, p. 371.

strikingly different principles and objectives are revealed when we look more closely at the work and membership of the Society of Arts for the period 1754 to 1800.

To begin with the founder, William Shipley: while it is true that he said nothing about a charter or government aid in either his *Proposals* (in which he speaks simply of “a body of generous and public spirited persons”) or in his *Scheme for putting the proposals in execution* (where he proposes that “a sufficient number of Subscribers . . . form themselves into a body, by the name of a Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Sciences and Manufactures”),¹¹ it is clear from a letter he wrote to Benjamin Franklin that he was averse to neither. “It is expected,” he told Franklin in September 1755, “that we shall soon be incorporated and perhaps may have grants from Parliament sufficient to promote by Premiums Things of the Uttermost Public Utility.”¹² This was only eighteen months after the foundation meeting at Rawthmell’s Coffee House when the Society had but eleven members. Shipley could hardly have expected incorporation to take place sooner, and had it done so in 1755 the Society of Arts would have achieved chartered status in less time than the Royal Society, the Society of Antiquaries, or the Dublin Society.¹³

The constitutional arrangements of these three senior incorporated societies were well known to the founding members of the Society of Arts. The Reverend Dr. Stephen Hales, John Short, Gustavus Brander, and Henry Baker were all Fellows of the Royal Society and the last two were also Fellows of the Antiquarian Society. Baker in particular was active in the affairs of both the Royal and the Antiquaries and in 1751, when Shipley was planning the formation of an English Society of Arts, Baker had offered “to oblige” him “with materials from the Dublin Society.”¹⁴ The “Dublin Society for Promoting Husbandry and other useful arts” had been founded in 1731, and in 1740 had adopted a plan for awarding premiums put forward by the Reverend Dr. Samuel Madden which foreshadowed Shipley’s *Proposals*.

¹¹ For a modern reprinting of the texts see D. G. C. Allan, *William Shipley* (London, 1968), pp. 42–45.

¹² William Shipley to Benjamin Franklin, 13 September 1755, Am. Phil. Soc. MSS, Franklin Paper I, 1, 38.

¹³ After informal beginnings in 1660 or earlier the Royal Society received a charter in 1662; the Antiquaries began in 1707 and were incorporated by 1751. The Dublin Society began in 1731 and was incorporated in 1750.

¹⁴ Allan, *William Shipley*, p. 47.

In 1750 it was incorporated by Royal Charter and in the 1760s received grants from the Irish Parliament.¹⁵ Madden seems to have been delighted at Shipley's English version of the Dublin Society and wrote an encouraging letter to him in 1757 stressing the value of both a charter of incorporation—"without that, as I formally ventured to tell you, your Society is but a rope of sand"—and of Royal patronage. He recalled how he had once submitted a plan for giving premiums in England to his "dear and ever honoured Master the late Prince of Wales, but I am sorry to say," Madden continued in his letter to Shipley, "though the Prince approved it and my zeal, he told me his Finances would not bear such a burden, which was fitter for his Royal Father's Encouragement (or words to that effect) than his, and so it had dropped neglected."¹⁶

Through another founding member of the Society of Arts Shipley could have heard of the zeal for artistic and scientific patronage which was still maintained at Leicester House and Kew. Dr. Stephen Hales had been Chaplain to the Princess Dowager of Wales since her husband's death in 1751. A veteran scientist and inventor who had won international fame for his writings on the flow of blood in animals and sap in plants, and the use of ventilating machines, he was quite happy to amuse his royal mistress and her children with landscapes made of sea mosses and with refrigeration devices. Both the Princess and "the worthy Lord Bute" took a real interest in the new botanical discoveries he showed them, and his plans for a "hot green house." In 1753 Hales had given Shipley "the greatest encouragement to proceed" with the foundation of a Society of Arts and he was elected a Vice-President of the infant institution when officers were first chosen in 1755. He brought to the new organization experience and knowledge of every aspect of the workings of mid-eighteenth-century societies and their associations with government. He was on the council of the Royal Society and was an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris. He had been a Trustee and Common Council Man of Georgia, and had advised the House of Commons on the question of rewarding Mrs. Stephens with £5,000 of public money for her cure of the stone. Hales knew the use of charters, parliamentary grants, and royal patronage. "Thus you see,"

¹⁵ M. F. Berry, *History of the Royal Dublin Society* (London, 1915), pp. 54–86.

¹⁶ Samuel Madden to Shipley, 26 November 1757, RSAA, Guard Book III, 119. Allan, *William Shipley*, pp. 16–17. (In quotations from MSS, spelling is modernized.)

he once told a fellow botanist, “a king’s or Princess’s word runneth swiftly, as Solomon observes.”¹⁷

Though the minutes of the Society of Arts say nothing about obtaining a charter of incorporation in the years when Shipley was writing about the matter to Franklin and Madden, they do note the receipt in February 1756 of “A plan for an Academy, of Painting, Sculpture etc., presented by Mr. Chere [Henry Chere, the sculptor].”¹⁸ Chere envisaged what he called “A Royal Academy of Arts” to be regulated by a charter. He was not the first to propose such an institution in England; the idea had been frequently canvassed amongst the talented group of artists associated with the court of Frederick, Prince of Wales, the St. Martin’s Lane Academy, and Old Slaughter’s Coffee House. Shipley had many links with this group and we may be sure he welcomed Chere’s plan.¹⁹ The Society agreed to correspond “with the said Academy” should it be founded, and in 1761 proposed to publish the plan and draft charter together with its own early minutes and other foundation documents as a “Historical Register.”²⁰ That some early members of the Society conceived the maintaining of an academy of arts as a proper extension of its work of judging premiums can be seen from an undated plan drawn up by William Chambers for a “Building for the Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.” Chambers envisaged a block on the scale of his subsequent rebuilding of Somerset House. There was to be a columned “Gallery for the candidates attending the Society, in the manner of an Egyptian Hall”; an oval-shaped “Theatre for the General Meetings of the Society.” Committee Rooms opened out of the Theatre and secretarial offices out of the Hall. Two long galleries were to be available for the exhibition of paintings and drawings, and for machinery and mechanical performances. There were to be special pavilions for sculpture and artist’s models. Chambers evidently believed that the Society might receive the government subsidy of “at least £100,000” for building, which Robert Wood, Under Secretary

¹⁷ Stephen Hales to John Ellis, 3 February 1752, printed in Sir J. E. Smith, *Correspondence of Linnaeus and Other Naturalists* (London, 1821), p. 26. For Hales in general see A. E. Clark-Kennedy, *Stephen Hales, D. D., F. R. S.: An Eighteenth Century Biography* (Cambridge, 1929). Dr. R. E. Schofield of Case Western Reserve University is engaged on a new life of Hales in connection with the author.

¹⁸ RSAA, *Society Minutes*, 19 February 1755.

¹⁹ Allan, *William Shipley*, p. 17.

²⁰ Wood, *History of the Royal Society of Arts*, p. 232.

of State, hinted to him in 1759 as likely for a national Academy of Arts.²¹

In that year he began the conversion of a large warehouse in the Strand into a magnificent if insecure setting for the Society's meetings. By 1760, according to Henry Baker, Chambers had provided a "fine large new room 51' x 38': 24' high with a cupola rising 16' more, supported by four fine Corinthian Pillars." However, by October 1762 Baker was complaining, "The Society of Arts is under Great Difficulties. Their fine room which was built by Mr. Chambers the King's Architect, is already tumbling down, and though strongly propped is unsafe to meet in."²² After a number of false starts in acquiring building sites and alternative architects the Society came to terms with the Adam brothers (Chambers' rivals) in 1771. The businesslike James Adam pointed out that "as the Society is not a body corporate, and consequently has no Legal Existence, I think 'tis reasonable for my Brothers and me to expect some security for the performance of covenants. . . . My Brothers and me have long been members of this Society, and nobody could be more sincerely solicitous for its success, and though the Society should never fix with us, yet we cannot help suggesting that we should be extremely happy to see it fixed somewhere, as we are strongly of opinion, that an Elegant and established Residence would give to the Society a greater appearance of permanency and Eclat."²³ Chambers had by this date obtained from the King himself "patronage, protection and support"²⁴ for a Royal Academy of Arts, and would soon be building for them a headquarters of equal magnificence to the Adams' Adelphi.

King George III's patronage "in a peculiar manner [of] the Polite Arts, and also . . . Natural History and Mechanics" was noted in the dedication of Dossie's *Memoirs of Agriculture and other Oeconomical Arts* (Vol. I, 1768), a publication sponsored by the Society of Arts

²¹ See J. Harris, "A Plan by Sir William Chambers for the Society of Arts," *JRSA*, 110 (1962), 351. Mr. Harris quotes a letter in the Bute Papers from Robert Wood to Bute, 28 October 1759.

²² Henry Baker to William Arderon, April 1760 and October 1762, Victoria and Albert Museum, Forster Collection, Baker/Arderon Correspondence, IV, 130, 190 (see D. G. C. Allan, *Houses of the Royal Society of Arts* [London, 1966], pp. 8–9).

²³ James Adam to the Society of Arts, 5 November 1771, RSAA MS Transactions, 1771; Allan, *Houses of the Royal Society of Arts*, pp. 9–13.

²⁴ Royal Academy Instrument of Foundation signed by the King, 10 December 1768 (printed, S. C. Hutchison, *The History of the Royal Academy, 1768–1968* [London, 1968], p. 209).

and largely made up of an account of its proceedings.²⁵ The dedication continued with the hope that “the proceedings of a Society instituted for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce . . . will not be thought wholly unworthy of your royal notice.” The King probably read Dossie’s *Memoirs* and, of course, knew Arthur Young’s *Annals*, where the Society’s agricultural work received fulsome praise.²⁶ He may have heard disconcerting stories about the Society in the 1780s when it was allowing the hot-tempered Irish artist, James Barry, to publicize its aims. The King declined to give the Society the trouble which he said would be caused by a royal visit to inspect Barry’s paintings in the Society’s Great Room.²⁷ The refusal was probably a deeply felt snub, but Barry’s portrayal of the “Progress of human culture” showed in one canvas an angry-looking America and in another a portrait of Edmund Burke (Plates 1 and 2), while his descriptive account of the paintings contained strong hints on Irish independence and the virtues of Popery.²⁸ In 1799, however, the King made amends by allowing a full account of the improvements he had carried out on the farm in the Great Park at Windsor to be communicated to the *Transactions* of the Society.²⁹

The Society had little control of the subject matter of Barry’s controversial paintings. He had consulted it over only one of the series—the fifth painting which he entitled the “Distribution of Premiums in the Society of Arts,” and even there he introduced the figure of the Prince of Wales on his own initiative.³⁰ At first this gave general satisfaction and it was proposed to elect the Prince as patron of the Society. But then came the Prince’s “marriage” to Mrs. Fitzherbert in December 1785, news of which may well have caused the Society to “postpone” the election, for fear of giving further offense to the King.³¹

P. N. Chantreau, the republican eulogist quoted at the beginning of this paper, stressed that the Society of Arts had not been estab-

²⁵ Wood, *History of the Royal Society of Arts*, p. 330.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117; M. Betham-Edwards, *The Autobiography of Arthur Young* (London, 1898), p. 112.

²⁷ Earl of Radnor to the Society, 18 April 1783, RSAA, Barry Papers, I, 60.

²⁸ James Barry, *An Account of a Series of Pictures in the Great Room of the Society of Arts* (London, 1783), pp. 59, 76, 127–28.

²⁹ *Transactions of the Society of Arts*, 17 (1799), 120.

³⁰ See my note, “James Barry’s Fifth Picture: Some Problems of Identification,” *JRSA*, 120 (1972), 536.

³¹ See Joanna Richardson, *George IV, A Portrait* (London, 1966), pp. 49–50.

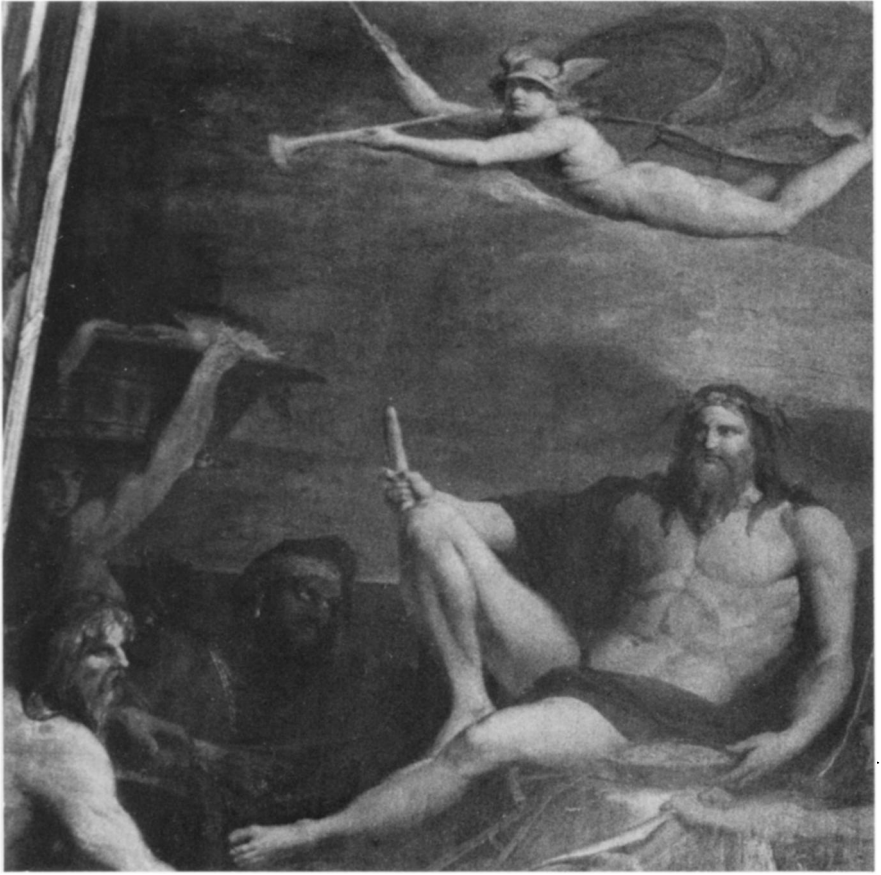


PLATE I. Detail from James Barry's fourth painting in the Society of Arts' Meeting Room, showing America and other continents personified bringing their goods to the River Thames. America is shown carrying a basket of produce. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Royal Society of Arts.)



PLATE 2. Detail from James Barry's fifth painting in the Society of Arts' Meeting Room, showing Edmund Burke (left center), with the Duke of Richmond, the Rev. Dr. Hales, and other Vice-Presidents of the Society. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Royal Society of Arts.)

lished by persons who held the reins of government in their hands.³² Certainly this applied to the small group of “Noblemen, Clergy, Gentlemen and Merchants” who met at Rawthmell’s Coffee House in March 1754. Yet Shipley himself had been encouraged to go to London from Northampton in order to establish the Society by the President of the Board of Trade, Lord Halifax,³³ and in the four years following the first meeting strong links were formed between the members of the government and the Society of Arts. On 28 February 1758, Henry Baker wrote an enthusiastic letter describing the progress of what he called “this Society”:

This Society now consists of near 700 Members, all the Ministers of State, and most of the chief nobility; and 20 new members at the least come in every week: we can afford to give away at least £1,500 a year, and are ready to encourage anything [which] can be proposed to serve the Public. . . . So much public spirit is no where else to be found and the Attendance and Care of all its Members is almost incredible. I doubt not in a few years they will gain and save Millions to this Nation and its Colonies.³⁴

Baker certainly exaggerated in saying that “all the Ministers of State” were members of the Society of Arts in February 1758, though there indeed were some great names in the membership list of that time. On it could be found the First Lord of the Treasury, the Duke of Newcastle,³⁵ the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Henry Bilson Legge,³⁶ the Secretaries of State, William Pitt³⁷ and Lord Holderness,³⁸ the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Anson,³⁹ and the Attorney General, Charles Pratt (later better known as Lord Chancellor Camden).⁴⁰ The Earls of Chesterfield, Lichfield, and Harcourt, Sir George Savile, Sir Francis Dashwood, Lord Willoughby of Parham, the Duke of Portland, the Marquess of Rockingham, and Charles Townshend⁴¹ had been elected before Baker wrote his letter, and by

³² Chantreau, *Voyage dans les trois royaumes*, pp. 174–75.

³³ Allan, *William Shipley*, p. 49.

³⁴ Baker to Arderon, 28 February 1758, Baker/Arderon Correspondence, IV, 41.

³⁵ Elected 15 February 1758.

³⁶ Elected 15 February 1758.

³⁷ Elected 15 February 1758.

³⁸ Elected 22 February 1758.

³⁹ Elected 1 February 1758.

⁴⁰ Elected 1 February 1758.

⁴¹ Elected 16 April 1755; 31 March, 14 April, 14 April 1756; 23 March, 23 April, 11 May, 1 June, 14 December 1757.

November 1761 the Dukes of Richmond and Grafton, the Earl of Halifax, the Duke of Devonshire, Lord North, and the Earl of Bute had joined the Society.⁴²

These grandees generally subscribed more than the customary two guineas annual subscription, and Lord Bute, in particular, is remembered for his exceptional donation of £40 instead of the usual twenty guineas required “for perpetual membership.”⁴³ Six of them—Lords Lichfield, Willoughby, and Harcourt, Sir George Savile, the Duke of Richmond, and the Earl (afterwards Duke) of Northumberland—served as Vice-Presidents of the Society. Others showed favors to the Society by virtue of the offices they held in the state. As Postmaster General, Sir Frances Dashwood (created Lord Le Despencer in 1766) ordered the premium lists of the Society to be distributed free of charge to all the post offices of Great Britain in 1772 and succeeding years.⁴⁴ Lord Halifax, as President of the Board of Trade, gave countenance to the Society’s work for the colonies. He had been proposed as a member of the Society of Arts by John Pownall, Secretary of the Board, who was himself an active member of long standing.⁴⁵ Pownall served as chairman of the Society’s own “Committee of Colonies and Trade” from 1761 to 1765. He is an example of the many administrative officials who joined the Society—for besides “The Plantation Office,” which he gave as his address, other members are listed in 1764, for instance, as being at “The Treasury,” “The Secretary of State’s Office,” “The Admiralty,” “The Navy Office,” “The War Office,” “The Pay Office,” “The Mint,” and the “General Post Office.”⁴⁶

Besides Lord Halifax, fourteen of the Lords of Trade had become members of the Society by the time the Board was abolished in 1782, one of them being the Earl of Hillsborough, Halifax’s successor as President.⁴⁷ Charles Jenkinson, Lord Hawkesbury (later Earl of Liverpool), the President of the revived Board of Trade, joined the Society in 1789 and was elected one of its Vice-Presidents in 1791; his

⁴² Elected 22 February, 8 March 1758; 9 April 1760; 21 January, 29 July, 21 October 1761.

⁴³ Wood, *History of the Royal Society of Arts*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ RSAA, Society Minutes, 20 May 1772; 14 April 1779.

⁴⁵ Elected 31 December 1755.

⁴⁶ RSAA, MS Subscription Book, 1764–1772.

⁴⁷ For the relationship between the Society of Arts and Board of Trade see below and my article, “The Society of Arts and the Committee of the Privy Council for Trade, 1786–1815,” *JRSA*, 109 (1960), 388.

obituary in the *Transactions of the Society* mentioned “the very great attention which his Lordship ever paid to the interests of the commerce of this country, which had given him a peculiar claim to the respect of the Society,” and the “long period” during which he had enjoyed His Majesty’s confidence.⁴⁸

Shipley’s Welsh correspondent Charles Powell had hoped that the foundation of a society to encourage arts, manufactures, and commerce would “not only unite in one common Bond all real Patriots . . . but will in time, I hope utterly extirpate all Party distinctions, the Bar of Society and Civil Government.”⁴⁹ Certainly the membership of the Society embraced a wide spectrum of political attitudes ranging from Thomas Hollis’ “Republican” eccentricities to Dr. Johnson’s robust loyalty.⁵⁰ Apart from the American troubles, which we know divided the members, we cannot say what effect the political storms of the period had on the Society.⁵¹ In public it was always impartial and we may assume that the Members of Parliament who took part in its activities saw it as just another worthy cause—like the support of charities and public works—providing them with “rational entertainment” and the esteem of their fellows.

Shipley, it may be recalled, had expected both a charter of incorporation and “grants from Parliament sufficient to promote by Premiums Things of the Uttermost Public Utility,” and he was probably fortified in this belief by the ease with which the Society obtained an act modifying the collection of tithes on madder in 1755, and the stir which Charles Whitworth and other M.P.’s made about the Society’s affairs during the first five years of its existence.⁵² Though no direct financial aid was forthcoming from Parliament to the Society of Arts, a contribution of £2,500 was voted in 1764 to Captain John Blake’s London fish-supply project following on the £3,500 already paid by the Society.⁵³ More significant was the influence of Parliament on the practices and policies of the Society.

⁴⁸ *Transactions of the Society of Arts*, 27 (1809), i.

⁴⁹ Allan, *William Shipley*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ See J. L. Abbott, “Thomas Hollis and the Society, 1756–74,” *JRSA*, 119 (1971), 711, and Abbott, “Dr. Johnson and the Society,” *ibid.*, 115 (1967), 486.

⁵¹ See Joshua Steele’s attitude to Franklin’s rights as a member in October 1778, cited in M. H. Combe Martin, “Joshua Steele,” Pt 2, *JRSA*, 117 (1969), 133.

⁵² For madder, see Wood, *History of the Royal Society of Arts*; for Whitworth, see Allan, *William Shipley*, p. 58.

⁵³ See Walter M. Stern, “Fish Supplies for London in the 1760s: An Experiment in Overland Transport,” *JRSA*, 118 (1970), 360, 433.

Propositions laid before the Society by its members had to pass through stages of debate, similar to those of a bill in the Houses of Parliament. The Society's meeting room was said by Andrew Kippis to be "the place where many persons choose to try, or to display, their oratorical abilities. Dr. Goldsmith, I remember, made an attempt at a speech, but was obliged to sit down in confusion. I once heard Dr. Johnson speak there, upon a subject relative to mechanics, with a propriety, perspicuity and energy which excited general admiration." Johnson, himself, told Sir William Scott that "several times" when he tried to speak in the Society of Arts and Sciences he had "found he could not get on."⁵⁴

In 1758 the Society approved the following "Order of Proceedings":

At all Meetings when any Member speaketh, he shall stand up, and address himself to the President or Chairman, and the rest shall remain silent. When two or more offer to speak together, the President is to determine who shall speak first. To begin upon Business at six o'Clock precisely. The Minutes of Last Meeting to be read. Candidates to be balloted for; during which Time the Business of the Evening is to be proceeded on. The Minutes of the last Meeting to be read a second Time; and no other Matter to be proposed till the same have been consider'd.

New Matter to be consider'd of.

Letters to be read.

Memorandums to be moved for.

The Names of the Candidates who have been proposed this Evening to be read. No Meeting is to be adjourned until the Majority of the Members present, upon the Question put, do agree thereto.⁵⁵

In 1764, when the Society received a "letter from certain Fishmongers containing an indecent Expression in the Beginning of it," a motion was solemnly carried in the House of Commons manner: "That the Letter . . . be burnt by the Porter . . . Agreed to, and the same was accordingly burnt."⁵⁶ However, this pseudoparliamentary method of carrying on the Society's affairs had certain disadvantages. John Ellis, colonial agent and botanist, suggested among other reforms he drafted that the meetings should be limited to two hours.

⁵⁴ *Biographia Britannica*, 2nd ed. (London, 1789), IV, 266; *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (Oxford, 1934–1950), II, 39; see Abbott, "Dr. Johnson and the Society," p. 395.

⁵⁵ *Rules and Orders of the Society . . . of Arts* (London, 1758), p. 12.

⁵⁶ RSAA, Society Minutes, 1 February 1764.

His statement of complaint is very revealing. He had often, he said, attended the meetings of the Society and “too many times with great regret been obliged to depart, without hearing anything said, that might be of use to the public; and have seen that time which is precious to people in business, taken up altogether in cavalling about trifles, and spent in settling the most trivial points of ceremony and economy. I have at other times to my amazement seen a party made to carry a point, which has afterwards proved to be a useless expence to the Society.”⁵⁷

Similar complaints were made in a letter written in reply to a circular about unpaid subscriptions in 1776:

For the first years that I had the honour of being a member I paid my subscriptions regularly and attended as often as I could; on those occasions I saw, or thought I saw, that the Society’s concerns were made a job of by a little prating Doctor, whose voice was loudest on every occasion. At one of these meetings a Friend of mine, a member, happened to differ in opinion from this Oracle, on which he gave him a challenge in the face of the whole company: now as I did not find myself disposed to venture my life with a petulant man who seemed determined to cut every man’s throat who differed from him in opinion, and as I could *not always* fall in with his notions I thought it both safest and best to withdraw from the Society with a whole skin.⁵⁸

Here, we are very close to Smollett’s world. In the *Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, Mr. Bramble’s nephew writes: “We are become members of the Society for the encouragement of Arts and have assisted at some of their deliberations, which were conducted with equal spirit and sagacity. My uncle is extremely fond of the Institution, which will certainly be productive of great advantages to the public, if from its democratical form, it does not degenerate into cabal and corruption.”⁵⁹ Smollett’s misgivings would have been confirmed had he attended the Society in the autumn of 1769 when internal strife competed with the affairs of John Wilkes for space in the

⁵⁷ Linnaean Society MS, draft letter from John Ellis to Lord Folkestone, President of the Society of Arts, ca. 1756–1760, printed, S. Savage, *Calendar of Ellis Mss* (London, 1948), p. 86. Dr. R. A. Rauschenberg of Ohio University is preparing a study of John Ellis and the Society.

⁵⁸ RSAA, Loose Archives, A8/30.

⁵⁹ T. Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) quoted in Wood, *History of the Royal Society of Arts*, p. 18. See G. S. Rousseau, “No Boasted Academy of Christendom: Smollett and the Society of Arts,” *JRSA*, 121 (1973), 468.

London newspapers.⁶⁰ The vacancy in the Secretaryship caused by the death of Dr. Peter Templeman on 23 September 1769 was to be filled by a ballot in which the entire membership of the Society was entitled to participate. The election was as hotly contested as any for a seat in Parliament. For amongst the candidates was a man who was himself well acquainted with political life. This was John Stewart, sometime secret agent for the Earl of Shelburne and at this date attached to the interests of the Marquess of Rockingham and on terms of personal friendship with Edmund Burke.

To win, Stewart would have had to overcome three opponents. The most formidable was the ultimately successful Samuel More, an influential member of the Society, who had assisted Dr. Templeman in the management of the secretarial business, and who was, as his subsequent record revealed, admirably qualified for the office. The others were Timothy Brecknock, a lawyer with some literary reputation and Lemuel Dole Nelme, a Board of Trade official with a special interest in linguistics. These were lightweights who would present no problems to More and Stewart.

The candidates canvassed for votes in advertisements which they inserted in the London newspapers. Their partisans extended the campaign by writing letters to the editors or by inserting announcements of their own. John Stewart was subjected to a prolonged attack in which his attempt to pack the membership of the Society was exposed to the public in a savage manner and his Scottish nationality held up to ridicule.

After three months of turmoil the election was held on 23 January 1770. It began at 11 A.M. and lasted for five hours. Scrutineers were elected by show of hands at the start of the meeting; counting took place between 4 P.M. and 8 P.M. The scrutineers then announced:

That they had proceeded to open the Ballot Glass and found the lists to be 487 in number as follows:

For Mr. S. More	292
Mr. J. Stewart	192
Mr. Brecknock	1
Irregular lists	2

Whereupon the meeting concluded with an announcement from

⁶⁰ See my account of the dispute over the Society's secretaryship, *JRSA*, 110 (1964), 715 ff., and *History Studies*, 2 (1968).

the Vice-President in the Chair that Mr. Samuel More was “duly Elected Secretary.” Thus ended the contest which had done so much to justify Smollett’s worries about the Society’s “democratical form.” So well and for so long did Samuel More discharge his office that historians of the Society have not only neglected the story of his fight for the secretaryship but have given to his tenure the symmetrical dating 1769–1799, forgetting the troubled interregnum when his succession must have seemed far from certain. Fortunately More’s lengthy secretaryship minimized such scandal as a tolerant age might have attached to the Society. Soon after his triumph a correspondent wished him “all the joy and happiness he can possibly expect in being elected secretary, to the most respectable Society in the world.”⁶¹

The premiums and bounties offered by the Society of Arts followed closely the established pattern of commercial legislation. Charles II’s Hemp Act was read aloud at a meeting of the Society and the Secretary was often asked to produce Customs figures so that the Society could assist in the national struggle to ensure a favorable balance of trade.⁶² In the North American colonies the Society stimulated royal governors and colonial legislatures to encourage economic development. “Influenced by the tenor and spirit of sundry acts of Parliament subsisting for more than a century past,” the Society—so wrote Samuel More as editor of Volume One of the *Transactions*—was “of opinion that to encourage in the British Colonies the culture and produce of such commodities as we must otherwise import from Foreign nations, would be more advantageous to the navigation and commerce of the kingdom than if the like things could be raised in the island of Great Britain.”⁶³ Even more traditional objectives were in the mind of the author of a “Memorial” entitled “Considerations of the improvement of the Manufacture of Wool in Great Britain,” which also cited More’s introduction to the first volume of the *Trans-*

⁶¹ J. Reynolds to Samuel More, 18 March 1770, RSAA, G. B., A, 135. More, who had been trained as an apothecary, was well known to the Wedgwoods as an industrial chemist. See J. K. des Fontaines, “The Society and the Early Wedgwoods,” *JRSA*, 119 (1971), 328.

⁶² The Act was 15 Car. 2 cap. 15. See RSAA, Society Minutes, 9 February 1757. At the very first meeting of the Society, Shipley was “desired to search the Books of entries at the Custom House” in regard to smalt, zaffer, and madder imports, *ibid.*, 22 March 1754.

⁶³ “Observations on the Effects of Rewards Bestowed in the Class of Colonies and Trade,” *Transactions of the Society of Arts*, 1 (1783), 23. For the Society’s cooperation with the government of Virginia see R. L. Hilldrup, “A Campaign to Promote the Prosperity of Colonial Virginia,” *JRSA*, 108 (1960), 940.

actions and was copied twice in manuscript by him between 1783 and 1787.⁶⁴

After praising the mechanization of the cotton industry, the Memorial pointed out that mechanical wool spinning would be even more valuable to the nation. As soon as foreign rivals obtained the machinery they would import cotton from the East and spin it, but as wool was England's "staple commodity" a mechanized woollen industry would never be affected by foreign competition. Wool smuggling would be reduced, the value of land increased, and the price of provisions diminished, all time-honored Mercantilist objectives. The Memorial suggested that as "the first hint" of mechanical cotton spinning had come from the Society of Arts, it would have been appropriate for the Society to offer a substantial premium for mechanical wool spinning. But the Society's financial reserves being limited, Parliament, which had already rewarded the discovery of an effective means of determining longitude, was urged to vote a sufficient sum and the competitors were to submit their machines to the investigations of the Society, "assisted by the advice of other able Mechanics and Manufacturers." It was true, concluded the Memorial, that "the Parliament has already bestowed rewards on ingenious persons for their discoveries but no object hitherto brought before them, whether considered with respect to magnitude or utility, has been in any degree comparable with this now mentioned. The reward therefore should be proportioned accordingly and, if it succeeds, there is not a doubt but the staple trade of these Kingdoms will receive from it such benefit as will eternize the memory of those who proposed or in any degree contributed to the bringing it to perfection."

One copy of the Memorial has been preserved with the Society's Archives and another with the Liverpool Papers in the British Museum. Both copies are in Samuel More's handwriting, but he cannot be established as its author.⁶⁵ Its style lacks the facility and grace which had become habitual to him after years of writing minutes and letters on behalf of the Society. Most likely it was one of many proposals which were addressed to him as Secretary. He decided to regard it as a request for Parliamentary action and to send it to George

⁶⁴ See my article, "A Proposed National Reward for Mechanical Wool Spinning," *JRSA*, 110 (1962), 529.

⁶⁵ RSAA, Loose Archives, A13/45; British Museum, Add. MSS 38221, fols. 105–8.

Dempster, a Member of Parliament who was known for his interest in economic matters. A short letter from Dempster confirms that More had sent him a copy of the Memorial in March 1785: "Your Memorial is perfect. I can neither add to it nor retrench a word, and shall make proper use of it when the House meets." Dempster did not raise the question in Parliament, and two years later More corresponded about the Memorial with Lord Hawkesbury, President of the Board of Trade.

Though no results appear to have followed from Hawkesbury's interest in mechanical wool spinning, he and his department continued to correspond with the Society of Arts on various economic matters.⁶⁶ On three occasions these exchanges between the Society of Arts and the Board of Trade resulted in legislation. In 1790 the duty on the importation of West Indian cashew gum, a product useful in dyeing and dressing black silk, was lowered. In 1791 the duty on imported tanned goatskins was raised and that on raw goatskins removed, thus encouraging the production of embossed leather in England. In 1796 the duty on imported black lead was reduced by means of an Act for "the more effectual preserving and encouraging the Manufacture of Black Lead Melting Pots." In each case Parliament was responding to the wishes of the Society of Arts expressed through the medium of the Board of Trade, while the vigorous implementation of existing Acts of Parliament for encouraging the supply of hemp—"so absolutely requisite both for our defense and trade"—followed on close collaboration between the Society and the Board in the years from 1786 to 1789 and again in 1805.⁶⁷

During the first half century of its existence the Society of Arts was associated through its membership and its policies with the executive and legislative branches of government. Its founding members and guiding officers sought to bring about direct state support for their objectives. Had they been successful they might well have criticized encroachments on their freedom in a way which would have been impossible on the Continent. But it is to misread their intentions to imagine that just because they were Englishmen they necessarily dis-

⁶⁶ See Allan, "The Society of Arts and the Committee of the Privy Council for Trade, 1786–1815," Pts. 2 and 3, *JRSA*, 109 (1961), 629, 807.

⁶⁷ See *JRSA*, 109 (1961), 389–94, and R. Dossie, *Memoirs of Agriculture and Other Oeconomical Art*, Vol I (London, 1768), 51.

liked government action. It was through accidental circumstances and not through any preconceived ideological standpoint that the chief organization for the public encouragement of arts, manufactures, and commerce in eighteenth-century England was an unincorporated voluntary society.

The Royal Society of Arts