

## Introduction

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Just as visitors to eighteenth-century London were puzzled by the modest nature of the Hanoverian Court of St James compared to the glories of the Bourbon Versailles or the Romanov St Petersburg,<sup>1</sup> so too have historians wondered at the lack of magnificence of the eighteenth-century Royal Society when compared to the Academies of continental Europe. Where, after the death of Newton, are the likes of Buffon, Clairaut, Euler, Lagrange, Laplace, Lavoisier and Linnaeus to be found in Britain? Why, until George III (and then only sporadically and indirectly), was the Royal Society not particularly Royal at all, being left to fend for itself in the cramped quarters of Crane Court – closer to stock jobbers and grocers than to courtiers and state officials – until the end of the century? What great inventions are to be laid at the door of the Fellows of a Society whose founding rhetoric included that of utility? And what, finally, are we to make of the obscure country parsons who sent in to the Society their seemingly random papers on Roman coins, violent thunderstorms or two-headed calves?<sup>2</sup>

The Royal Society of London was not an Academy that hired Academicians of great theoretical or mathematical brilliance to bring glory to its princely patron or to solve technical problems. It was a club that elected its own Fellows and relied upon them, and not the King, for funds and action. They respected the plain fact, and those who could produce it, and were suspicious of generalizations and generalizers. While they revered their greatest Fellow, Sir Isaac Newton, they largely ignored his mathematizing methodology and concentrated on the production of novel experimental effects, accurate measurement and meticulous natural history. Their energy waxed and waned, but never disappeared; this issue of the *BJHS* is dedicated to showing some of them at work at an important eighteenth-century London club.

An astonishing array of clubs existed in eighteenth-century Britain. Some, like the gentlemen's clubs of St James's, were well established, exclusive and powerful, others, like the City of London coffee house clubs that Larry Stewart brings so beautifully to life in this

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I thank the contributors for their interest in this special issue which arose from a session at the joint British Society for the History of Science, History of Science Society and the Canadian Society for the History and Philosophy of Science meeting in Edinburgh, July 1996, and the anonymous reader who made some very useful suggestions in his or her report, some of which have been incorporated into this introduction and the following papers.

<sup>1</sup> John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, 1997, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750*, New York, 1998, especially in Chapter 6, “Strange facts”, convincingly make sense of such papers.

issue of the *BJHS*, were more evanescent, but all were dedicated to advancing their members' interests in a civil society.<sup>3</sup> While any given club could be strictly exclusive (and indeed some degree of exclusivity is a defining characteristic of a club), members, however unequal in general society, were putatively equal within the restricted society of a club. For example, in the Royal Society (as in Parliament), when matters had to be decided either routinely or extraordinarily, one man's vote was as good as another's. Indeed, one of the pleasures of a club was the enjoyment of an internal sociability which temporarily effaced the daily insults of an extremely hierarchical and competitive external society. At the Royal Society the tools of that sociability included shared correspondence networks, economic interests, observations, instruments and readings of papers. Unsociable practices that were solitary (grand theorizing), arcane (pure mathematics) or grossly self-interested (secretive invention) were greatly discouraged.

But why did this particular club exist? Or, to put it another way, why were the Fellows sociable about nature in particular, when they could equally well have met, as others did, to discuss farming, or art, or politics, or horse-racing instead? What was their interest in that group of subjects which today we want to call science? The first interest – one that we can easily understand, and nearly always find, in our age of extreme economic rationalism – was pragmatic. As John Gascoigne elegantly demonstrates in this issue, this pragmatism was twofold: to help the Society and to help society (or more particularly the national interests of the imperial state). David Philip Miller also gives a convincing account of pragmatic interests, albeit subtle ones, at work in the Society as provincial industrialists advanced themselves in London. The second interest was constituted by the pleasure – theological or psychological – that skilfully contemplating or manipulating natural or artificial entities brought. Much more work needs to be done on this explanation, and while alone it is certainly not sufficient nor should it be ignored.<sup>4</sup> How else can we explain the relentless sets of observations and experiments by Fellows which have no particular utility? The third interest was the search for approbation within the Society and further abroad – as evinced in both Andrea Rusnock's and my own paper – for expertise as a practitioner of one of the major divisions of natural knowledge (natural history, mixed mathematics, medicine, experimental philosophy, or occasionally natural philosophy or pure mathematics). These three motivations – the search for utility, pleasure and reputation – existed in varying degrees amongst different individuals and groups at the Society, as the papers that follow demonstrate.

This issue of the *BJHS* makes the case that the Royal Society mattered very much in the eighteenth century, but it does not, of course, go to the other extreme of arguing that it alone mattered for the production of natural knowledge in Britain. Larry Stewart's paper rightly makes that clear, and there were other important scientific societies (most notably the Lunar Society and the Royal Society of Edinburgh) and institutions in eighteenth-century Britain that encouraged investigations of the natural and artificial world (Edinburgh, Glasgow and Cambridge Universities, Christ's Mathematical Hospital, the

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Broman, 'The Habermasian public sphere and "science in the Enlightenment"', *History of Science* (1998), 36, 123–49, especially 125–9.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Sutton, *Science for a Polite Society: Gender, Culture, and the Demonstration of Enlightenment*, Boulder, 1995, is admirable in this regard.

Board of Longitude, the Society of Arts and the Admiralty among others). However, by the eighteenth century, the Royal Society, although mostly neglected by the Crown, was through its own efforts well established and flourishing: it attracted visitors and letter writers from all of Britain and much of western Europe, and its Fellows – with methods and instruments appropriate to the investigation of the natural and, less frequently, the artificial world – attended carefully, and sometimes passionately, to subjects that interested them. To these people the Society mattered; perhaps we ought to find out why.