



Press Release

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Exhibit honours ladies who launched revolutionary learning plan

It was a daring philanthropic endeavour conceived in the so-called Athens of the North ... but, just like Edinburgh's ill-fated Parthenon, its lofty ambition remained unfulfilled.

Enthusiasm for the mission to improve womens' lives in 1820s Greece matched that for the classically inspired National Monument of Scotland – begun at the same time – but support for both quickly evaporated.

Now the grandly named *Scottish Ladies' Society for Promoting Education, Especially That of Females in Greece* is to be remembered in a University of Edinburgh exhibition, which will explore Scottish–Greek connections in the early 19th century..

The Society's meandering title might sound like a gift to the writers of amiable period dramas, but behind it lay real focus and intent.

Fired by educational zeal and a love the classical world, the mission to support a newly-autonomous Greece, independent from the Ottoman Empire, caught the Edinburgh public's imagination.

Greece will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the outbreak of the War of Independence on Thursday (25 March)

The *Edinburgh Star* newspaper carried a report on 12 April 1825 of a meeting held at the Assembly Rooms, George Street, to launch the venture. Around 1,000 people attended.

A copy of the report, held in the collections of the University of Edinburgh, will feature in *Edina/Athena: The Greek Revolution and the Athens of the North, 1821–2021*, which is due to open on 29 October.

Also included will be contemporary plans drawn up by architect Charles Robert Cockerell for the National Monument on Calton Hill, which was intended to commemorate the fallen in the Napoleonic Wars but was never finished.

Alasdair Grant, one of the curators of the new exhibition, said the society's energy was derived from a romantic appreciation of ancient Greece.

Said Dr Grant, of the University of Edinburgh's School of History, Classics & Archaeology: "The Greek Revolution of 1821 is one of the pivotal moments in modern European history. Volunteers from across Europe and the US joined the conflict, drawn by the lore of Greece's classical past and, in many cases, disillusioned or out of work after the defeat of Napoleon."

Scots played a major role. One early recruit was the soldier and, later, historian of the conflict, Thomas Gordon of Cairness, Aberdeenshire. His contemporary, Lord Byron – 'half a Scot by birth, and bred a whole one' – famously died of fever at Missolonghi in 1824.

That same year Edward Masson, a schoolmaster from Laurencekirk, Kincardineshire, travelled to Greece, where he worked as an educator, naval attaché, and attorney. Far less well known, however, is the role of Scottish women in revolutionary Greece.

The meeting of April 1825 reflected ideas widespread in western Europe at the time. It was only right, claimed the editor of the report, that Britain, 'where Education is best understood, and most widely



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diffused among all the nations of the earth', should repay in some small way the debt it owed to Greece by taking classical education back home.

It was a commonplace at the time to assert that the Ottoman conquest in the 15th century had deprived the Greeks of their liberty and their learning.

With their newly won self-governance, so the argument went, the Greek people needed an education to match, and it was vital that this education should not be limited to men alone. Those who were educated could then pass on their learning to their compatriots.

Forward-looking as these ideals of gender equality may have been, the meeting at the Assembly Rooms was led entirely by men and no women's names were mentioned in the report.

It is only from a biographical memoir printed for family use that we know the name of the prime mover – Agnes Renton, who took the role of secretary.

Lady Carnegie agreed to act as president and, although some agents of the society were sponsored to teach in the Ionian Islands, the initiative was soon abandoned. Its vision, however, eventually became reality when a different enterprise succeeded where the Scottish Ladies' Society could not.

In 1831, the American missionaries John and Frances Hill founded the Hill School in Athens, surviving today as the Hill Memorial School. Frances was in charge of the girls' education.

After her death, the school came under the direction of Bessie Masson. Bessie was Frances' niece, and she was also Edward Masson's daughter. Agnes Renton's vision for women's education therefore flourished in Greece after all, though under others' leadership..

The upcoming exhibition will be hosted by the University of Edinburgh's School of History, Classics and Archaeology in connection with the University's Centre for Research Collections.

The exhibition is supported by the A. G. Leventis Foundation as part of Protovoulia 1821–2021 ('Initiative 1821–2021').

Edina/Athena: The Greek Revolution and the Athens of the North, 1821–2021 will run from 29 October until 29 January 2022 in the University of Edinburgh Main Library Exhibition Gallery. Admission will be free.

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