

John Robertson: 'Andrew Fletcher and the Classics'

In his paper, John Robertson suggested that the 'Ancients and Moderns' debate may provide a revealing context for the thought of Andrew Fletcher, whose writings have otherwise been difficult to understand in the wider Scottish intellectual setting of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Fletcher of course enjoys a long-standing reputation as 'the Patriot' on account of his opposition to incorporating union with England; but in his own time he was as well known as 'Cato nostri seculi' – the Cato of the age – and as a champion of the Ancients in literature and politics. The paper revisited the evidence for this characterisation under four heads: his knowledge of ancient languages, his library, comments in his correspondence on ancient music and buildings, and his political writings.

Fletcher will have learned Latin and probably also some Greek at St Andrews University, where he is likely to have taken the first two years' classes. He seems not to have read Greek as well as he could Latin; later he lamented his lack of proficiency in the language. His collection of books, perhaps the largest in Scotland at the time, was nonetheless rich in Greek and Latin classical authors, including poets, orators, historians and philosophers. What is particularly striking about the collection is that it contained both early editions (including many incunabula) and those only just published: Fletcher evidently sought both the old and rare and the best modern editions. There is a suggestion that he himself planned to produce a new edition of Lucan. From his correspondence comes additional evidence of his interest in ancient culture: he received letters from the mathematician John Wallis answering his questions about ancient music as an education in virtue, and he wrote to his brother, Henry Fletcher, about the design of a building along ancient (and modern Italian) principles, with high storeys and small windows. Finally, there are two clear examples of his adopting ancient models in his political writings: his proposals for the military training of the population of the British Isles in the *Discourse of Government with relation to Militias* (1698) and his proposal of domestic servitude as a solution to the problem of vagrancy in the second of his *Discourses concerning the Affairs of Scotland* (1698) – a proposal which Fletcher vehemently distinguished from political 'slavery'.

Robertson stressed that the presence of these proposals in Fletcher's political writings does not make him an 'Ancient' in any straightforward, derivative sense of the term. The concepts which were at work in his arguments were clearly modern, deriving to a great extent from Machiavelli and Harrington, as well as from the contemporary debate over the relation between the rise of great cities and the spread of 'luxury'. This is particularly evident in his account of the way in which noble lordship had been undermined across much of Europe since 1500 – a process he was very keen to see extended to Scotland. The modernity of Fletcher's historical and political thinking, however, is not incompatible with thinking of him as an 'Ancient' in the 'Ancients and Moderns' debate: as scholars such as Dan Edelstein have shown for the debate in France in this period, those who styled themselves 'ancients' did so in identifiably modern ways.