Women that would plague me with rational conversation’: Aspiring Women and Scottish Whigs, c. 1790–1830

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The death of Lord Jeffrey is indeed a mournful event to me. ... It is about fifty years since I first met him. ... He delighted in checking aspiring or ambitious women, as he used to call Mrs Millar and me – ‘women that would plague him with rational conversation’ – and for many years of our early acquaintance I feared more than I liked him.

The women whom, fifty years later, Eliza Fletcher represented as like herself, ‘aspiring or ambitious’ in early nineteenth-century Edinburgh society were, like Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review* from 1802, heirs to the Enlightenment in Scotland. The significance of the Scottish Enlightenment for the language employed about the condition of women in the early nineteenth century, and potentially for the social and political practice of women of the middling to upper ranks has still to be identified. Much recent work has suggested that both the conjectural histories of the condition of women shaped by John Millar and Lord Kames, and the language of ‘complacency’ and female sensibility employed by Henry Mackenzie and his associates, served to differentiate more sharply a ‘private and intimate domestic realm’ within which alone women’s moral powers and influence might be fulfilled. But most recently Mary Catherine Moran has argued that conjectural histories of the condition of women may be read rather as indicators of progress and refinement in the manners of men, implying a passivity for women, even if she also identified Millar’s qualified endorsement of a social role for women in a modernising commercial society as in ‘an intermediary social sphere that was thought to guarantee both civic and domestic virtue’. The emphasis of Millar and others on a progressive improvement in the situation of women, as a significant index of the development of a commercial and civilized society characterized by free institutions, could however be employed in more challenging ways. Kathryn Gleadle has suggested its importance within the reforming language of early nineteenth-century radical and feminist thinking in England. These themes transcended Anglo-Scottish differences; but a perspective from Scotland can indicate slightly distinctive approaches to the appropriation, and reworking, of the language of progressive improvement in women’s situation. In an oppositional spirit, Scottish Whigs and
radicals brought such historical perspectives together with the republican framework of civic humanism. As this essay explores, individual women, and men, appropriated these discourses to express aspirations for their familial lives, and in social and even civic contexts, in ways which cut across any simple distinctions between public and private worlds.

Eliza Fletcher can be located within a small group of women from academic, professional and literary circles, Whiggish and progressive in their outlook, based in Scotland but with far wider connections. They included women from the families of two major figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. One was that of John Millar, Professor of Civil Law at the University of Glasgow between 1761 and 1801, and author of the Observations concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society (1771) which included his important chapter, ‘Of the Rank and Condition of Women in Different Ages’. Millar’s mother was a cousin of another distinguished member of the literati, William Cullen, Professor of Medicine first at Glasgow, and then, from 1761 to his death in 1790, in Edinburgh. The connection between the Millar and Cullen families was to be maintained in subsequent generations.

Adam Smith wrote in 1788 of John Millar’s ‘family of young daughters who are all remarkably well behaved women, very sensible and very clever, but not very handsome’. And in 1800 Frederick Lamb, a young, aristocratic, rather scornful boarder in John Millar’s household, wrote that ‘all the ladies [here] are contaminated with an itch for philosophy and learning. ... they are all philosophers’. Of John Millar’s six daughters, four figure in the network I trace here. Two, Anne and Janet Millar remained in the family home at Milheugh, Blantyre, all their lives. Agnes Millar married James Mylne, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow, who was the uncle of Frances Wright and Camilla Wright from Dundee, both of whom joined his household in Glasgow in 1813. Frances Wright was the utopian socialist whose dramatic but tragic career has been well told by many biographers, and was avidly followed in the letters of all the women discussed here.

That career was followed especially closely by the daughters of William Cullen. Of Cullen’s household, Eliza Fletcher later wrote that David Hume, Adam Smith, Joseph Black and Henry Mackenzie had all been frequent visitors and that ‘in their society his highly gifted family had acquired a taste for all that was intellectual and refined’. The youngest daughter, Robina, married John Millar’s eldest son, John Craig Millar in 1789, and rapidly became an intimate friend of Eliza Fletcher after her arrival in Edinburgh in 1791. Fletcher, from a liberal Yorkshire family, married the Edinburgh lawyer and burgh reformer Archibald Fletcher. She remembered of her friend in the early 1790s ‘the brilliancy of her talents and the charms of her conversation’. Robina’s husband, John Craig Millar was a member of the Edinburgh Society of the Friends of the People and associate of some of the radicals tried and sentenced for sedition after the British Convention had met in Edinburgh in autumn 1793; in 1795 the couple emigrated to what they believed to be the far more sympathetic political climate of the United States, where they enjoyed for a time the hospitality of Benjamin Rush, the