

Ina Ferris, "The Debut of *The Edinburgh Review*, 1802"

## Abstract

The publication of *The Edinburgh Review* in October 1802 was to alter the landscape and status of periodical publications for the nineteenth century. In its entry into the lowly sphere of review writing, the new journal instituted key innovations that transformed the literary review into a powerful cultural forum within an expanding print culture.



On 10 October 1802, the enterprising [Edinburgh](#) publisher Archibald Constable launched a new journal, *The Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal*, which was to alter the landscape and status of periodical publication for the rest of the century. With its first number weighing in at a hefty 252 pages and priced at 5 shillings, the *Edinburgh Review* established itself from the start as a journal directed to “middling” class readers with time on their hands and a certain intellectual or cultural ambition. These same readers were those spearheading the marked boom in reading that characterized the early decades of the nineteenth century (St Clair, Jackson), readers who relied on the literary reviews as the primary source of information about new publications. Before the advent of the *Edinburgh Review*, the reviews typically took the form of monthly periodicals like the *Critical Review* and the *Monthly Review*, whose goal was to provide their readers with notices of as many new books as possible. By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, the commitment to extensive coverage was under pressure from two fronts: the number of publications rose very rapidly, making it difficult for the reviews to keep up, while at the same time readers were becoming increasingly interested in a more focused access to the broad intellectual culture of their time than offered by the medley of notices found in the standard journals (Klancher). A potential space was thus opened up in the literary field for a different kind of periodical, and the *Edinburgh Review* stepped in at precisely this juncture with a striking new format whose impact was dramatic and immediate. Henry Cockburn did not greatly exaggerate when he famously defined the effect of the first number of the new journal as “electrical,” constituting “an entire and instant change of every thing that the public had been accustomed to in that sort of composition.” Stressing its innovative force, Cockburn goes on to declare: “The old periodical opiates were extinguished at once. The learning of the new Journal, its talent, its spirit, its writing, its independence, were all new; and the surprise was increased by a work so full of public life springing up, suddenly, in a remote part of the kingdom” (131).



Figure 1: The first issue of the journal

Although remote geographically from the great metropolis of London, [Edinburgh](#) was not only well established as a crucible of modern thought, having been home to key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment whose writings had spread across Europe, but the city itself had a close-knit and flourishing club culture of intellectual and literary societies, an associational network out of which emerged the project that became the *Edinburgh Review*. Equally

important, [Edinburgh](#) publishers grew at a faster rate than London publishers in the period between 1774 and 1815, as enterprising entrepreneurs like Constable and William Blackwood turned [Edinburgh](#) into a thriving publishing center that rivalled London in the early years of the century (Swaim 12). As Ian Duncan has argued, early nineteenth-century [Edinburgh](#) was the site of generic and professional innovations that shaped the broad literary culture of nineteenth-century Great Britain, emerging as “the capital city of modern literature” (20). In the achievement of this status, the critical quarterly invented by the *Edinburgh Review* played a key role, becoming the “mandarin periodical form of the nineteenth century” (Shattock 5).

The project for the journal began casually enough in informal conversations among a set of young professionals in [Edinburgh](#) whose liberal politics blocked their career paths in a city governed by Tory patronage, and who were consequently (in Cockburn’s tactful phrase) “masters of their own time” (126). Four men were pre-eminent in its founding, all members of the Speculative Society and/or the Academy of Physics, prominent philosophical debating clubs: Sydney Smith, Francis Jeffrey, Francis Horner, and Henry Brougham. The idea for the journal was suggested by Sydney Smith (1771-1845), a reform-minded and witty Church of England clergyman without a living (the only non-Scot in the group), who served as editor of the first three numbers, after which the editorship was taken over by Francis Jeffrey (1773-1850), a member of the [Edinburgh](#) bar committed to parliamentary reform and without much call for his legal labours. Jeffrey served as editor from 1803 until 1829; accordingly, his name became the one most closely identified with the *Edinburgh Review* for which he also wrote over 200 articles, mainly on political and literary subjects. Rounding out the founding quartet were two other underemployed members of the [Edinburgh](#) bar, the youngest members of the group: Francis Horner (1778-1817), an able proponent of Adam Smith’s political economy and author of influential articles on economic questions for the journal; and Henry Brougham (1778-1868), the most prolific contributor to the *Edinburgh Review*, producing articles for thirty-five years on all kinds of subjects despite a high-profile legal career as a defender of prominent Whig causes in England and, ultimately, ascension to the position of Lord Chancellor in 1830.

Imbued with a distinct sense of purpose, the four allies affixed to the first number of their new journal an Advertisement confidently laying out the three features that distinguished their venture from the standard review: selection, quarterly publication, and longer articles of larger scope. Importantly, each of these features removed the *Edinburgh Review* from the goals of currency and timeliness governing the existing reviews with their investment in the rapid transmission of literary intelligence. Instead the new journal deliberately placed itself within the temporality of the time-lag that allowed time (and space) for reflection and judgement, a positioning crucial to establishing its critical authority. Renouncing “any attempt at exhibiting a complete view of modern literature,” the editors declared that their review would confine its attention “to works that either have attained, or deserve, a certain portion of celebrity” (Advertisement). Hence, they decided on quarterly rather than monthly publication, a decision that in turn instigated the production of a new sort of book notice, one that could provide “full discussion” not only of specific books but of the “important subjects” they raised. The impact of this latter decision was immediately apparent: the first number of the *Edinburgh Review* was twice the length of the leading monthlies in October 1802 but contained far fewer articles. The *Monthly Review* and *Critical Review*, for example, contained forty-three and sixty reviews respectively, while the inaugural number of the *Edinburgh Review* had just twenty-nine (and this number would fall to half within a decade). Herein lay the definitive generic move. The *Edinburgh Review* transformed the book review into the review essay, the hybrid form Walter Bagehot (himself an eminent practitioner) later summed up as the “review-like essay and the essay-like review” (4). This new form gave review writing a new autonomy as a distinct critical discourse. As Jeffrey emphasized when looking back to the founding of the *Edinburgh Review* some decades later, the journal refused from the start “to confine itself to the humble task of pronouncing on the mere literary merits of the works that came before it”; rather, it sought “to go deeply into the *Principles* on which its judgments were to be rested; as well as to take large and Original views of all the important questions to which those works might relate” (*Contributions* 1.11). No longer a strictly auxiliary form, the periodical essay became the discursive form in which culture itself was increasingly defined for an expanding middle-class public (Butler, Erickson, Klancher).

This public quickly took to the new periodical format. The modest run of 750 copies of the first number soon sold out, and Constable rushed further “editions” to press. Furthermore, the journal sold not only in its periodical form but in annual bound volumes published for later sale, and such volumes often continued to be issued well after the date of initial publication. The “article commemorating the journal’s own centenary in 1902, for example, refers to a 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the first volume that was published in 1814 (“*Edinburgh Review*” 284). Within five years of its advent, the new review was outselling all the major London journals with a print run of 7,000; by 1814 (the peak of its influence) circulation numbers had increased to 13,000, although as John Clive points out, numbers tell only part of the story, actual readers being estimated at three times that number at least (135). What matters more than numbers “is the number of readers of any publication in the nineteenth century is notoriously difficult to determine “is their placement in the culture of literacy and the kind of attention they

received. The *Edinburgh Review* achieved a high public profile in short order, and it spun off imitators, most dramatically the conservative *Quarterly Review*, which was founded in 1809 in explicit opposition to its politics but in close imitation of its format.

What made the *Edinburgh* such a success was largely the vigour of its discourse and a signature style that managed to be at once authoritative and entertaining. On the one hand, the review made prominent a rational mode of "philosophical criticism" (an inheritance from the Scottish Enlightenment in whose thought most of the founders were grounded and whose principles they promulgated); on the other, it wielded a lively "slashing" style that answered (with some relish) to the juridical model of the journal's motto from Publius Syrus: *judex damnatur cum nocens absolvitur* (the judge stands condemned when the guilty is acquitted). Both were immediately on display in the opening articles of the inaugural issue. Jeffrey launched the number with a lengthy article on J. J. Mounier's *De l'influence des Philosophes . . . sur la Revolution de France*, establishing the cosmopolitan and analytic tone that identified the early *Edinburgh Review* as a product of the late Enlightenment. As Mark Schoenfield has observed, Mounier (former president of the National Assembly) "models a middle ground" for the new review to occupy (68). Jeffrey commends Mounier's adherence to "principles of liberty" and "notions of regulated freedom" ("Mounier" 2); at the same time, however, he mounts a critique of his central argument in order to make a claim for the importance of public genres like the critical review. Mounier sought to refute the conservative charge that the writings of the French Enlightenment were a catalyst of the French Revolution, but Jeffrey points out that, in his desire to rescue the *philosophes* from a contaminating association with the excesses of the Revolution, he risks denying them any social or political impact at all. The problem, in his view, is that Mounier has no theory of historical causation to allow for a discrimination of causes, and, in setting up his own explanatory model, Jeffrey makes two points of particular salience for understanding the function of the public journal: first, he promotes a model of modern society as a highly complex system of interacting social, economic, political, and ideological forces; second, he argues that this is a highly mediated system, thoroughly saturated by print media. Discounting assumptions of "natural" or "spontaneous" public energies, he shifts attention to notions of transmission, which place on public genres (like periodicals) a responsibility to be "dispassionate" and to avoid the "extravagance" and "absurdity" of a writer like Rousseau whose writings for Jeffrey were "unquestionably pernicious" ("Mounier" 10, 11). A stable (but not static) modern social system thus requires a considered public discourse like the one displayed in his own sober and carefully analytic opening piece.

The second article, by contrast, exemplifies the "slashing" style for which the *Edinburgh Review* became notorious and which answers to the demand for entertainment, as much as knowledge, in publications seeking to make their way in a crowded literary market. "Dr. Parr's *Spital Sermon*" by Sydney Smith is a lively skewering of a sermon (delivered by a man of letters sometimes regarded as the Whig Johnson) that attacks Godwin's notion of universal benevolence. Like Jeffrey, Smith exposes flaws in the argument under review; unlike Jeffrey, however, he delights in linguistic play and makes Parr's own language and form the central target of his critique. He opens the review, for example, by elaborating an analogy between Parr's wig (which swells out in a great frizz) and his sermon: "After the manner of his wig, the Doctor has constructed his sermon, giving us a discourse of no common length, and subjoining an immeasurable mass of notes, which appear to concern every learned thing, every learned man, and almost every unlearned man, since the beginning of the world" (18). Even more, Parr's language everywhere "smells of the rhetorician," the result of his clinging to a false notion of "eloquence" (20, 22). Smith's serious point is that such "eloquence" is the sign of an outdated and inferior model of knowledge, and his article thus initiates the campaign against "rhetoric" that was to be conducted by the early *Edinburgh Review* whenever knowledge genres came under its purview, notably those in the sciences and social sciences on which it tended to concentrate (the first number, for instance, covers an impressive range of such subjects, including "medicine, optics, ethnology, geology, and economics").

Smith's "slashing" of Parr is humorous and delivered in a spirit of benevolence (if also condescension), but what would become the most famous of the articles in the first issue, Jeffrey's attack on the Lake Poets, exemplifies the "slashing" style in its more severe register. The article is a blend of the philosophical and the slashing styles: Jeffrey's critique is a principled one, but the energy of the writing lies in the force of the latter. For Jeffrey, Wordsworth's model of poetry constituted a betrayal of the proper function of poetry, and he takes advantage of the publication of a poem by Robert Southey to mount an attack on this new "school" as a whole, launching his offensive through the "slashing" technique of opening with a striking analogy: "Poetry has this much, at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago, by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is not longer lawful to call in question" ("Southey's *Thalaba*" 63). Developing the conceit, he casts the new poets as radical "dissenters," and he himself assumes the "inquisitorial office" proper to a critic, examining the tenets of those brought before him for "judgment." As he lays these out, poetics and politics begin to blur, the ground of Jeffrey's eventual negative judgment

being his identification of "discontent" with the existing order of both literature and society as the motor of the new aesthetic.

Both in its "slashing" and "philosophical" phases, the discourse of the *Edinburgh Review* signalled the advent of a new figure in print culture: the professional critic. The journal not only gave its contributors more scope through its essay format but it paid them very well, enabling a successful periodical writer to make a respectable middle-class income (Erickson 71-2). Periodical writing in general was widely regarded at the turn of the century as a lowly, disreputable "trade" rather than a gentlemanly "profession," and the young professionals who founded the *Edinburgh Review* had some initial hesitation over the implications of their action for their own status. Jeffrey, for example, expressed concern that he risked degrading his "profession" of law by taking on the editorship, and Cockburn dryly notes that initially the journal was "to be all gentlemen, and no pay" (1.145, 133). This soon changed. The *Edinburgh Review* did not just begin to pay contributors but to *require* every contributor to accept payment, thereby putting all on the same professional footing. To attract the best writers Constable offered 10 guineas a sheet, doubling the going rate. As a comparison: when the *Monthly Review* launched in 1796, it paid five guineas a sheet when most magazines were offering two to four guineas (Erickson 75). The *Edinburgh Review's* minimum fee then rose to sixteen guineas for the duration of Jeffrey's editorship, although most contributors received much higher payment (Cockburn 1.136). This payment scheme, along with the format of the review essay, underwrote the transformation of the lowly reviewer into the cultural critic, who would evolve into the nineteenth-century public intellectual exemplified by figures like Thomas Carlyle, Walter Bagehot, and Matthew Arnold. Reflecting on the way in which the success of the *Edinburgh Review* helped to usher into the literary field the "specialist critic," William Christie makes the important point that the "specialty" at issue was not in one or another discipline: the expertise represented by the new periodical reviewer was precisely "critical" expertise; they were professional readers" (37). Not so incidentally, then, the historical moment William St. Clair has identified with the emergence of Britain as the first modern "reading nation" also threw up a new "reading profession."

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