William Small (1734-1775)

Dr. William Small was born in Scotland in 1734. He received his college education at Marischal College in Aberdeen, and then moved to the United States in 1758 to take on a teaching position at the prestigious William and Mary University in Virginia. His duties as professorship of natural philosophy included teaching mathematics and science as well as what was termed “moral philosophy.” Small was a great proponent of Enlightenment thought, and in his teaching he focused greatly on the works of writers akin to Locke in social thought, as well as Bacon and Newton in the more technical fields of scientific inquiry. Besides his basic teaching duties, Small also carried out a program of dramatic curriculum reform.

Small and his modern methods had a lasting effect on his department at William and Mary. He also made a tremendous impression on one of his students, who was also one of the most celebrated figures in American history: Thomas Jefferson. Letters written by Jefferson refer directly to Small’s profound influence on his way of thought, and assert that Jefferson’s interest in science was largely due to Small’s mentoring.

In 1765, illness forced Small to return to England. A written recommendation from Benjamin Franklin paved his career path, and on the strength of that recommendation Small settled in Birmingham to practice medicine (which had originally been his primary field). He was instrumental in the formation of the Lunar Society, a group of prominent scientists who met monthly to debate and discuss matters of scientific import and practical applications (members included such famous entities as James Watt, inventor of the steam engine).

Though plagued by poor health, Small was industrious in the last years of his life, and had a hand in advances in the fields of chemistry and engineering (working alongside captains of industry like Matthew Boulton to improve production processes and design). He was also a cultural and social figure, involved in such activities as bringing the Theater Royal to Birmingham; this charismatic and sociable aspect of Small’s personality was part of what allowed him to have such an impact upon the scientific community.

In 1775, Small’s illness got the better of him. He died at the age of 41, leaving a professional legacy that is all the more impressive for the fact that it was achieved in such an abbreviated career.

Sources:

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