

The Enlightenment in Basel: Isaak Iselin

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The eighteenth century brought the ideas of the Enlightenment to Basel, where one of its most important representatives in Switzerland was a Basel patrician. Isaak Iselin, born in 1728 into a family of the *Daig*, studied law in Basel and Göttingen, became secretary of the council, and devoted his life to the reform of society through reason, education and benevolence. His major work, *On the History of Mankind*, published in 1764, presented a philosophy of history in which humanity progressed from savagery to civilisation through the development of reason and sociability.¹

Iselin was an admirer of the French Physiocrats, the school of economists who taught that agriculture was the source of all wealth and that free trade would promote prosperity. He published a journal, the *Ephemeriden der Menschheit*, which spread their ideas in the German-speaking world. He was a co-founder of the Helvetic Society, founded in 1761, which brought together reform-minded Swiss from all cantons and confessions and prepared the idea of a Swiss nation. And in 1777, he founded in Basel the Society for the Promotion of the Good and the Public Benefit, the *Gesellschaft für das Gute und Gemeinnützige*, known as the GGG, which organised charitable and educational projects and which still exists as one of the most important social institutions of the city.

Iselin's combination of patrician status, public office, economic reform and practical benevolence is characteristic of the Basel Enlightenment. It was a moderate Enlightenment, which sought to improve society through education, charity and gradual reform, within the framework of the existing order. It accepted the privileges of the patriciate and demanded that the patricians use them for the common good. This ethic of responsible wealth, which Iselin articulated, continued the Reformed doctrine of stewardship and anticipated the modern ideas of corporate social responsibility and philanthropy.

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1 Notes

1. On Isaak Iselin (1728–1782), secretary of the Basel council, author of *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit* (1764) and co-founder of the Helvetische Gesellschaft (1761/62) and the GGG (1777), see HLS, article "Iselin, Isaak". To be verified. ↩

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