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John Playfair in the Natural Philosophy Classroom

While textbooks are deservedly considered valuable and interesting primary sources by mathematicians as well as by historians of mathematics education, these materials generally provide little insight into how classes were conducted each day or into what students actually learned. To develop a more complete picture of educational practice, textbooks must be combined with information gleaned from administrative records, student notebooks, student reminiscences, obituaries, and the like. Unearthing that sort of documentation, though, often depends as much on serendipity as on systematic research. John Playfair (1748–1819) served as professor of mathematics and then of natural philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. In addition to *Elements of Geometry* and *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth*, the books for which he is best known, he organized his lectures into *Outlines of Natural Philosophy* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1812–1814). There are also at least five extant sets of notes taken by students who attended his natural philosophy course.

This paper will analyze as many of these notes as possible, focusing especially on the following questions: How closely do the notes conform to each other and to the textbook? Did the material Playfair covered change over time, such as before and after *Outlines* was published or when he revised the textbook in 1816 and 1819? Did the fact that he was primarily a mathematician early in his career inform his choice of topics and the manner in which he presented them? Were there aspects of the course that were uniquely Scottish?