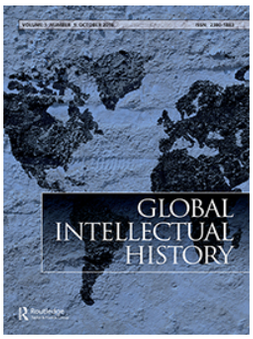

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The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution

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BOOK REVIEW

The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution, by Anna Plassart, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 266 pp., £67 (hardback), ISBN: 9781107091764.

This fine monograph is both an exemplary piece of intellectual excavation, and a bold attempt to reconfigure the terms of analysis regarding one of the most controversial and well-studied events in modern history. For it is Plassart's argument that the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment not only examined the French Revolution with greater depth and seriousness than has hitherto been appreciated, but that they did so using a shared (if internally contested and evolving) approach that warrants consideration as a major frame of interpretation in its own right.

As Plassart begins by noting, three intellectual approaches have tended to dominate interpretations of the French Revolution. The first arose contemporaneously, in the famous debate between Tom Paine and Edmund Burke. This cast the Revolution as either the victory of Enlightened progress, secured by the application of theoretical doctrines of the rights of man so as to sweep away the corruption and failure of the *Ancien Regime* – or its precise opposite: the frenzied destruction of fragile institutions, traditions, customs, and *mores* in the name of deluded metaphysical speculation, resulting in enormous human cost. The second – associated most famously with Tocqueville's *The Ancient Regime and the Revolution* – presents the events unleashed in 1789 as the denouement of social and economic forces internal to France, set in motion centuries earlier, building inevitably to a revolutionary crescendo. The third approach (now surely in terminal decline, but for long periods perhaps the most dominant) was the Marxist explanation of the Revolution as a bourgeois uprising, prompted by capitalist development, that swept away an era of aristocratic privilege.

In contrast, Plassart makes the case for seeing the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment as providing an original analytical frame for making sense of world historical development in general, and then attempting to use that to explain not only the revolutionary period from 1789 through to the Terror and Thermidor, but also the post-Republican détente, the rise of Napoleon, and what he signalled for the European balance of power and future international warfare. The key to this uniquely Scottish interpretation of French events lies in the advances initially forwarded by David Hume and Adam Smith. Both thinkers offered deeply historicized pictures of societal change and progress, tracing the interplay of individual and group psychologies with concrete political and economic circumstances that could themselves only be understood as the outcomes of interlinked European legacies. On Plassart's reading, the analyses yielded by applying such an approach to the French Revolution deserve to be taken seriously not just as historical artefacts, but as offering the potential for viable analyses of the Revolution today.

Hume died in 1776, and although Smith's 1790 additions to the final version of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* contained abstract – if pointed and highly insightful – reflections on political reform, he never addressed the Revolution directly. Thus when it came to understanding French events through Scottish lenses, it was left to the next generation of thinkers to make use of the historically conditioned analyses of politics that Hume and Smith bequeathed. Whilst Scotland in the 1790s remained largely a bastion of Tory loyalism, its intelligentsia was mostly made up of Whig theorists of progress, disposed to view Revolutionary events with optimistic eyes. For the most part, the Scots eschewed the terms of the Burke–Paine debate

that took place in London (a core reason, Plassart argues, why they have largely gone unnoticed in subsequent historical analysis). They reached instead for the tools of historically conditioned political theory.

Yet this was by no means a straightforward affair, in particular for the trio of Scottish thinkers that are the focus of the middle sections of Plassart's study: John Millar, James Mackintosh, and Adam Ferguson. All departed in significant ways from Hume and Smith, and it is a virtue of Plassart's study that she shows just how contested the legacy of those famous philosophers was; how the Scottish Enlightenment was anything but a reification of its most famous sons. In all three cases (and most especially Ferguson's) significant alterations and innovation were made to the employment of history to explain political events in France. The results, however, were mixed. Millar and Mackintosh, in particular, struggled to reconcile the complex, unintended consequence-driven historical analyses pioneered by Hume and (especially) Smith with a pre-existing desire to interpret the French Revolution as an instance of human progress. Millar, whilst chastising those who failed to take Smith's lesson about the uncertainty of desirable human advancement and the fragility of successful commercial societies, himself ultimately fell into the sort of Whig teleology Smith warned against. Mackintosh's 1791 *Vindiciae Gallicae* attempted (rather uncomfortably) to draw on the historical analyses laid down by Hume and Smith, yet combined this with an affirmation of both the classical Republican nature, and hence deep political desirability, of the Revolutionary events. His optimistic predictions of the happy future awaiting France were proven so disastrously wrong that his intellectual reputation never recovered.

Particularly noteworthy, however, is Plassart's reconstruction of Adam Ferguson's complex and evolving response to French events. Continuing a revisionist rehabilitation of Ferguson advanced most notably in recent years by Iain McDaniel,[1] Plassart presents Ferguson as a more nuanced, interesting, and powerful thinker than has typically been appreciated. That he disagreed strenuously with both Hume and Smith's analyses of European history, whilst also insisting against them on the continuing relevance of Roman lessons to modern statecraft, is well known. But these facts notwithstanding, Plassart argues that Ferguson cannot accurately be portrayed as a misty-eyed enthusiast for ancient republican virtue, and hence a simplistic opponent of commercial modernity. On the contrary, Ferguson's analysis – and his deep suspicion and hostility to the aims and means of the Revolution – led him to favour modern commercial states over (what he saw as) a corrupted pseudo-Republicanism which fraudulently aped the military virtues of the ancient world in a bid for internal and external conquest. Although Ferguson believed that the British state would benefit from a reinjection of civic virtue, the French experiment was nonetheless a monstrosity. And whilst Ferguson was more cautious with regards the need for war than Burke, he agreed on the necessity of facing head-on what was being unleashed on the continent. Plassart makes Ferguson come alive, rendering his views with a bite and sharpness that many readers will have previously struggled to extract from the original texts – no mean feat, and one worth applauding.

The final third of the book concentrates on the next generation of Scottish thinkers. This is principally organized around the revived *Edinburgh Review* in the first decade of the nineteenth century, particularly James Mill, and with Mackintosh still featuring but attempting to lose his reputation as the man who argued against Burke's grim prognoses and came out dead wrong. Yet the problems faced by these younger thinkers had changed: the revolutionary wars and the rise of Napoleon, in particular, demanded new analyses. These were initially dealt with by incorporating the new philosophical optimism introduced by Dougald Stewart and Thomas Reid, explicitly a counter to the sceptical moral theories favoured by Hume and Smith. Appealing to an explicitly theological providentialism that Smith and Hume would never have countenanced, Stewart's alternative science of politics built human progress into

the motor of history (even if Stewart himself erred on the conservative and cautious side when it came to the Revolution). For a while, Plassart shows, the younger Scots writing in and around the *Edinburgh Review* attempted to combine a historical political analysis with a faith in guaranteed human progress, explaining the bloody and chaotic excesses of the Terror and the revolutionary wars as necessary, if unpleasant, steps on an upward human trajectory. But this could only last so long. With Napoleon's triumphs over Prussia and Russia leading to domination of the continent, and the British turn to naval empire and the rise of aggressive forms of military nationalism combined with commercial jealousy, it became difficult to view global events with optimism and faith in happy progress. In turn, the younger Scots came to concentrate, with a steelier gaze, on the challenges faced by commercial modernity in a world of 'total' wars, where eighteenth-century notions of the balance of power appeared obsolete. The key issue became whether the imperatives of commercial survival would compel the French into eventually abandoning their experiments in perverse modern mutations of ancient political paradigms, or whether the course of fragile human development charted by Hume and Smith would be shattered in the future to come.

Plassart shows how, and with what varying successes, the Scots wrestled not only with the most difficult questions of what the French revolution was, and how it had come about, but also of what it meant, and what it would unleash. If one were to lodge a complaint, it would be that it is not always clear how figures like Ferguson and Mill, who look so resolutely *unlike* Hume and Smith in their philosophical foundations and in the histories they ultimately produced, can really be said to be part of a shared intellectual response. Disagreement of sufficient severity results in the abandonment, rather than mere refinement or evolution, of a paradigm. Similarly, the precise reason for Dougald Stewart's importance to the later Scots thinkers is left less clear than it might have been, whilst the relationship of a Humean 'science of man' to a historical politics is often alluded to but never explained (admittedly a daunting task), and sits in tension with the distinctly and purposefully anti-Humean philosophies of Stewart and Reid that allegedly came to dominate later Scots thinking. But these are avenues for further exploration and questioning, which we ought to be grateful to Plassart for opening. This careful and clear historical study makes for a fresh and valuable contribution. Rather than the niche analysis that the careless reader might initially take it for, it is dealing with big themes, of big concern. It deserves a wide audience.

Note

1. See most especially, McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*.

Bibliography

McDaniel, Iain. *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

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