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Introduction

> *Here lyes a Singular Genius [France] possessed of eminence in every Science & Art. He lived a great Statesman & Warriour but died a Coxcomb and now lyes here in Sure and Certain hope of raising at the last day to have dance.*

Such was Adam Ferguson's defiant epitaph to the French nation, written in 1798, at the height of General Bonaparte's glory.[1] The quotation encapsulates the ambivalent nature of Ferguson's sentiments towards the French: the same mixture of fear, admiration and defiance marked all his reflections on a subject that engrossed his attention until his death, only a few months after Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo.

Ferguson (1723–1816) had spent much of his long life advocating republican ideals of citizenship and military virtue as ways of maintaining Scottish national identity and British virtue within the commercial kingdom of Great Britain. After 1789, he watched the French implement a revolution that was both awe-inspiring in its energy and regenerative powers, and terrifying in its aggressive pursuit of democratic universalism. Some aspects of the French Republic and Empire embodied not only Ferguson's dearest ambitions for Scotland but also his darkest fears for the future of Britain. Until his death in 1816, he continued to reflect on the events in France, and in his very last unpublished manuscripts he still strove to understand what lessons could be drawn from the French experiments for Scotland, Britain and Europe.

Ferguson is only one of several Scottish writers examined in this book. His example, nevertheless, encapsulates the concerns that characterise the reception of the French Revolution by the Scottish philosophers and historians. Their cohesive and distinctive commentaries were not centred on assessing the political merits of French claims for democracy and

[1] 31 Dec 1798, Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson. Adam Ferguson, *The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson*, 2 vols. (London: Pickering, William, 1995), vol. II, p. 447.

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natural rights, but rather on placing the unexpected rebirth of a species of republican military energy in the historical context of Europe's developing commercial society. The energising and transforming effect of democracy on France's social fabric, they observed, transformed the nature of traditional patriotism, and the new national spirit that emerged threatened to overthrow the balance of modern Europe's commercial, military and diplomatic relations, and to divert European nations from the path of progress identified in the Scottish histories of civil society. This book, therefore, argues that the eighteenth-century theories of the Scottish Enlightenment were mobilised in the 1790s to formulate an analysis of post-1789 European societies that focused not on political institutions or political reform, but rather on the nature of modernity itself.

Historians of ideas have traditionally discussed the significance of the French Revolution through the prism of several major interpretations. The first of these frameworks was the violent critique formulated by Edmund Burke, which paved the way for much of the anti-revolutionary and counter-Enlightenment discourse of the nineteenth century.[2] In the early 1790s Burke argued that rational, abstract theories of democracy and rights ignored the complexities of human nature as well as the heritage of history. Their implementation in France, he warned, had destroyed the chivalric springs of modern civilisation, and would soon lead to aggressive ideological war. A more historically focused interpretation was that of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose 1856 study of the *Ancien Régime* presented the Revolution as decisively concluding the dissolution of feudal institutions and process of centralisation begun under the French monarchy. His analysis of the Revolution's importance as part of a long-term process of modernisation, and of its immediate failures as arising from the inexperience of deputies imbued with the abstract principles of French *philosophie*, is usually counted amongst the 'liberal' accounts that dominated nineteenth-century interpretations of the Revolution.[3] Finally, Marxist accounts pushed furthest analytical attempts to present the Revolution as

[2] Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', in Francis Canavan (ed.), *Select Works of Edmund Burke* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999). Amongst others, see I. Hampsher-Monk, *The Impact of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Daniel O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'ancien régime et la Révolution* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1856). See also Hedva Ben-Israel Kidron, *English Historians on the French Revolution* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968). Another major influence on the French historiography of the Revolution in the nineteenth century was Jules Michelet's *History of the French Revolution* (1847), which idealised 'the people' as the driving force behind the 'good' revolution of 1789.

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a political event resulting primarily from social and economic historical conditions, to analyse it as a typical example of class struggle resulting in the victory of the bourgeoisie; this was the account that dominated much of the early and mid-twentieth century.[4]

Looking at 1790s Scottish discourses, this book argues, reveals an alternative and equally powerful interpretative framework for the Revolution. This framework was not directly built upon discussions of ideology, historical evolution of institutions, or social and economic conditions, but rather upon the evolution of French *moeurs* – more specifically, the transformation of the polite, civilised *moeurs* that had shaped and defined the 'modernity' analysed by Hume and Smith in the eighteenth century. The Scots observed what they understood as a military- and democracy-led transformation of European modern morals. This allowed them to notice and analyse post-revolutionary evolutions that remained all but ignored by their contemporaries: the transformation of warfare, the emergence of nationalism, and the new relations between states, war and commerce that shaped the post-revolutionary international order. In these evolutions, they believed, resided the real historical significance of the French Revolution.

For reasons that will become clear, this Scottish framework has been lost to us. This book not only recovers the Scottish philosophers' commentary on the French Revolution but also argues that it was distinct, significant and influential enough to deserve to be considered as a major intellectual discussion in its own right.

Scottish Enlightenment and French Revolution in historiography

From the perspective of European intellectual history, the events of the 1790s in France marked both the culmination and the downfall of the Enlightenment project: supporters and critics of the Revolution alike identified the French reforms underway as the expression of the *philosophes*' agenda for rational knowledge and equality. Consequently, Enlightenment values of reason and progress became increasingly questioned as the Revolution turned to bloodshed and authoritarian government. Instead, notions of national historical and cultural heritage gained prominence in the following decade in counter-revolutionary movements. Simultaneously, the Revolution's democratic promises marked the dawn of the era of the individual – embodied by both the emotional self of the

[4] See François Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

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early romantic movements and the individual liberty championed by nineteenth-century liberalism. As the revolutionaries' thirst for equality was blamed for the Terror, discourses of the 'rights of men' were largely phased out in favour of scientific attempts to study economic and social relations within society, whether framed in terms of socialism, political economy or sociology.[5]

The place of the Scottish Enlightenment, in the usual narrative, has primarily resided in its role as a provider of intellectual tools for nineteenth-century social science and political economy, especially as used by French and British nineteenth-century proponents of economic and political liberalism. This traditional account, it will be argued, ignores other major aspects of Scottish influence. Such a reassessment of the heritage of the Scottish Enlightenment in the nineteenth century, however, first requires presenting eighteenth-century Scottish thought on its own terms and in its own context.

The Scottish writers examined in this book belonged to a nation that had, in still-recent times, become integrated into a wider commercial empire. After the Union of Parliament was completed in 1707, a period of unparalleled economic growth had followed. With the Presbyterian Church protected by the Act of Union, by 1750 a strong consensus had formed among the urban Scottish intellectual elite about both Scotland's integration within the British State and the political settlement of 1688.[6] Simultaneously, an unprecedented period of intellectual activity flourished in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh. This 'Scottish Enlightenment', whose canon was first outlined and celebrated by Dugald Stewart, but which did not emerge as an object of scholarly study until the second half of the twentieth century, has been variously described as part of the larger European Enlightenment, as a specifically Scottish cultural phenomenon, as founded upon the new discipline of political economy, as the direct heir of the Newtonian and Baconian scientific revolution, and as a primarily cultural phenomenon built upon urban Presbyterian networks.[7] Its identity and nature, consequently, are not easily defined: even if we put aside

[5] Such 'scientific' approaches in the early nineteenth century included James Mill's utilitarian campaigns as well as Jean-Baptiste Say's *industrialisme*, Comte's *sociologie* and Robert Owen and Saint-Simon's socialist attempts to reorganise industry and society.

[6] Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c.1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 25. Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), pp. 80–2.

[7] Michael Brown, 'Creating a Canon: Dugald Stewart's Construction of the Scottish Enlightenment', *History of Universities*, 16 (2001). For a discussion of the nature of the Scottish Enlightenment and of the debate around its very existence, see Alexander Broadie, 'Introduction', in Alexander Broadie

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the Scots' medical and scientific contributions, it is not immediately obvious why we should subsume under one single appellation protagonists as philosophically and politically disparate as David Hume, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, William Robertson or Hugh Blair, whose fields of enquiry ranged from natural theology and linguistics to law and economics.

Yet, in recent years historians of political ideas have highlighted several unifying characteristics bringing together Scottish Enlightenment writers: they were not primarily interested in governmental forms and the modalities of political liberty, but rather in the nature of human progress and the historical conditions for its development. This was embodied by Hume's project for a 'science of man', which sought to elucidate the links between men's moral nature and human societies, and later on, by Stewart's political economy–focused 'science of politics'.[8] Consequently, this book shows, the Scottish philosophers and historians' views of the Revolution were not primarily focused on pro- or anti-democratic political ideologies, but were, rather, rooted in the science of man-inspired histories of civil society developed by Smith and his colleagues, and in Scottish eighteenth-century discussions of the place of modern commercial states in the mechanism of progress. This allowed them to offer powerful and original commentaries on both the Revolution and its long-term consequences for Europe.

The reception of the French Revolution in Britain has traditionally been studied through the lens of Edmund Burke's immensely influential *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Throughout the 1790s, the British reaction to French events was shaped by the debate between Burke and the English radicals. The former asserted that the French destruction of religion and chivalry threatened the very roots of civilised society, while the latter celebrated French ideas of universal 'rights of man' and political liberty. Yet both sides concurred in their joint invocation of the French Revolution as a polemical instrument in the disputes surrounding the issues of parliamentary reform; as a result, the Revolution was chiefly seen through the prism of English domestic politics. Thus, the Burke-Paine debate and the pamphlet war of the 1790s both reshaped British politics (especially as the dispute between Burke and Fox redefined the nature and

(ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1–3.

[8] John Robertson, 'The Scottish Contribution to the Enlightenment', in P.B. Wood (ed.), *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2000), p. 42.

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tenets of Whiggism) and profoundly inflected the development of British political thought. As the languages of civic republicanism and Lockean rights were largely discredited by the French events, reformist discourses shifted towards a technical language primarily based upon political economy.[9] Radical discourses also increasingly appealed to economic arguments to justify their demands for reforms (although British popular radicalism continued to rely on the language of natural rights well into the nineteenth century), while Whiggism slowly morphed into a liberal discourse that avoided references both to Lockean rights arguments and to republican civic virtue. The middle-class reformist movements of the early nineteenth-century (including the rising utilitarian movement) were thus firmly built upon the tenets of classical political economy.

The French Revolution and the British debate that ensued did, it is clear, profoundly reshape British political thought. The puzzling element lies in how little the great Scottish philosophers and historians are believed to have contributed to this reshaping. Studies of the British philosophical commentary on the Revolution remain largely London-centric, and there has been no scholarly attempt to examine the Scottish debate in its own right.[10] This is because the Scottish contribution has been portrayed as an indirect one, residing primarily in the influence of Smithian political economy. Indeed, while the authority of Smith and Scottish history was regularly invoked (especially by the radicals) during the pamphlet war of the 1790s, it is only in the first decades of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of a new generation of Scottish writers active on the London journalistic and political scene, that Scottish writers took an active role in inflecting the public debate about the French Revolution, and the ensuing Empire and Napoleonic wars.

Why, then, do the great figures of the Scottish Enlightenment appear to be so conspicuously absent from the British revolutionary debate? After all, Scottish moral and political philosophy was at its zenith in the late eighteenth century. Hume and Smith had reinvented history writing and almost single-handedly established the discipline of political

[9] Gregory Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics* (Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 69.

[10] There have of course been several studies focused on individual writers' views of the Revolution. See for instance Yasuo Amoh, 'Ferguson's Views on the American and French Revolutions', in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds.), *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008), Richard B. Sher, '1688 and 1788: William Robertson on Revolution in Britain and France', in Paul Dukes and John Dunkley (eds.), *Culture and Revolution* (London: Pinter, 1990), Hideo Tanaka, 'John Millar and the French Revolution', *Keizai-ronso: The Economic Review*, 141.

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economy – and Ferguson, Millar and Robertson were not far behind, as they enjoyed not only British-wide, but European-wide reputations as scholars and historians. Yet the Scottish philosophers did not participate in the pamphlet war of the 1790s.[11] The only notable Scottish interventions were formulated by a set of younger writers, who were politically invested either with the Foxite Whigs (in the case of James Mackintosh) or with the English radicals (in the case of Thomas Christie).

The starting point of this enquiry, however, is that the Scottish response to the events in France cannot be understood within the sole parameters of the English debate. The suggestion, instead, is that Burke's commentary, and the dispute it started off, have enjoyed disproportionate attention – precisely because the philosophical dispute that undergirded the Burke-Paine dispute also intersected with British high politics, and was thus made highly visible to both contemporary commentators and modern historians.

Yet the Scottish philosophers did produce a large body of commentary about the French Revolution. Men who are now regarded as key thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment – Adam Smith, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, Dugald Stewart – observed the events of 1789 with anxious interest. Smith and Robertson died while the Revolution was still unfolding, in 1790 and 1793 respectively, and while neither published any direct commentary on the French events, we do retain Smith's cryptic additions to the 1790 edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and some letters and unpublished sermons by Robertson. Ferguson, who was retired by 1789 and working on a new edition of his Roman history in the 1790s, produced a copious and largely appalled commentary on the evolution of French events throughout the 1790s and 1800s, which was formulated in his private letters as well as inserted in his newly published works (primarily his *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, 1792). Millar was the only major Scottish Enlightenment writer to directly engage with the political debate of the 1790s, although he did so for a specifically Scottish audience, like his friend and student Lord Lauderdale. His Foxite pamphlets were also published anonymously, perhaps because they were too sympathetic to France and French principles for a teacher who was already politically suspect in the eyes of the Scottish establishment. (Dugald Stewart took this reasoning to the extreme after suffering early anti-revolutionary backlash for his rather innocuous praise of French philosophy, and observed a prudent silence in the following decades.)

[11] For an attempt to assess the Scottish reception of the French Revolution however, see Henry W. Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1912).

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The depth and significance of this Scottish commentary has remained hidden from view, primarily because it was phrased as a philosophical and historical commentary largely detached from domestic political disputes. The following chapters show, however, that it is both powerful in itself, and essential to a better understanding of several major nineteenth-century intellectual debates.

Outline

This book charts the Scottish commentary by showing how the French Revolution was perceived as a challenge to Hume and Smith's accounts of progress and modernity after 1789, which led Scottish writers to formulate an original science of man–inspired philosophical and historical analysis of the Revolution. Thus, they offered an alternative framework for its interpretation, based upon what they saw as a shift in the nature of modern morals, and therefore in the relations between war, commerce and modern states, which was then reinvested by the next generation of Scottish thinkers in the early nineteenth century. This contributed to shaping familiar and less-familiar discussions of imperialism, state relations, political economy, and ancient and modern liberty.

The first part of the book presents the historiographical premises of the enquiry. The Scottish response to the French Revolution, it is suggested in Chapter 1, has been under-studied because it stood outside of the Burke-Paine debate and did not interact with British high politics. The Scottish philosophers bestowed little attention upon the debate that was raging in Britain because they examined the Revolution not in terms of Whiggism, domestic reform or natural rights, but rather as part of a more abstract philosophical and historical analysis of societal progress. Strikingly, this analysis shared some roots with Burke's own philosophical stance – but this was not the aspect of Burke's commentary that was picked up on by his opponents and supporters in the Burke-Paine controversy, or indeed most developed by himself in the 1790s.

The philosophical roots of the Scottish commentary on the French Revolution, Chapter 2 shows, lay in Hume's eighteenth-century project for a science of man. Since the publication of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume and Smith had leaned upon the tools of moral philosophy to decipher the links between human nature, society and progress: following them, Ferguson, Robertson, Millar and others developed their enquiry in historical writings that also relied upon the heritage of continental jurisprudential thought and a strong indigenous

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tradition of republicanism. Their social and economic analyses of historical progress displayed only limited interest in institutional reform and pro- or anti-democratic debates. More directly relevant to liberty, in their view, was the societal and moral progress towards politeness and civilisation that characterise modern society. This progress, they warned, was more likely to be threatened by the destructive national jealousies of commercial states than by political reform itself.

The book's second part presents the Scottish philosophers' reception of the French Revolution in the 1790s, focusing on an 'older' generation of Scottish writers (especially Millar, Robertson and Ferguson), as well as the early 1790s commentary of the younger Mackintosh.

Chapter 3 places the Scots' immediate responses to French events in their Scottish context. It argues that the historiographical focus on classifying contemporary writers as friends or enemies of the Revolution has concealed significant aspects of the Scottish commentary. While they certainly disagreed on such hotly disputed issues as democracy or property reform, the Scots' differing stances are in fact best understood not as clashing political discourses, but rather as variations upon a common set of philosophical and historical concerns inherited from the eighteenth-century project for a science of man and politics.

The eighteenth-century Scottish reflections about sociability and moral progress, Chapter 4 argues, were mobilised and reinterpreted as the Scots attempted to make sense of the French Revolution as a historical event. Since the early nineteenth century, Scottish 'conjectural' history has been hailed as a major part of the Scottish Enlightenment's intellectual heritage, and has provided the primary entry point for accounts of the Scottish appraisal of the French Revolution – both through Mackintosh's response to Burke in the early 1790s and through studies of the next generation of Scottish writers in the early nineteenth century.[12] Yet, the chapter suggests, the Scottish post-1789 progress-based accounts (and justifications) of the Revolution were in clear contradiction with the pre-revolutionary historical and political writings of Hume, Smith and even Millar. The more direct contribution and impact of Hume and Smith's historical reflections is to be found in other aspects of the Scots' post-1789 historical accounts, especially in their insistence that military structures played a key part in the historical transformation of post-revolutionary French morals (as argued by Millar and Mackintosh).

[12] See Biancamaria Fontana, *Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society: The 'Edinburgh Review' 1802–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Chapter 1.

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Chapter 5 examines the Scottish commentary on war and national sentiment after 1789, especially (but not exclusively) in the writings of Millar and Lauderdale. It argues that their concern for the post-revolutionary transformation of modern sociability formed the core of their reflection about the French Revolution, and gave it much of its distinctiveness. The modern, polite commercial society hailed by Smithian political economy was, they believed, being challenged by the appearance of a new type of society, at once more efficient, more enthusiastic and more aggressive. This they attributed to the long-term effects of 'democratic spirit' on France's society, and more importantly, on its army. This led them to focus on the changing nature of modern sociability and national feeling in France, and on the revolution in warfare that swept over Europe after 1793.

Chapter 6 presents an alternative take on the Revolution that was equally shaped by a deep concern for sociability and morals, but interpreted the eighteenth-century project for a science of man in a different direction. Ferguson was tremendously concerned by the modern evolution of war and imperialism, yet his commentary was not a simple nostalgic celebration of patriotism and military spirit. In his view, the French army clearly illustrated the dangers of ancient democratic spirit, especially when displayed in the context of modern commercial society. The war, therefore, further encouraged him to reflect on the conditions of coexistence for commerce and military virtue in Britain, and on the future of Britain's growing empire of trade.

The book's third part follows this Scottish discourse into the early nineteenth century. Taken together, the commentaries of Millar, Mackintosh, Lauderdale and Ferguson formed a coherent discourse shaped by a similar set of concerns. The eighteenth-century Scottish enquiry into the mechanisms of sociability, the progress of morality and the nature of modernity had allowed them to formulate a distinctive and far-sighted commentary on the Revolution, framed in terms of emerging concerns about the evolution of war, modern sociability and national sentiment. The following chapters trace the heritage of these discussions in the writings of the *Edinburgh Review* circle (including the writing of the *Review*'s occasional collaborators James Mill and James Mackintosh). They argue that the Scottish commentary was not only significant in its own right but also influential at least into the first half of the nineteenth century.

The heritage of Scottish Enlightenment thought in the nineteenth century, the historiographical consensus holds, primarily lies in the introduction of Scottish historiography and political economy in English

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