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Book Reviews

Roger L. Emerson. *Essays on David Hume, Medical Men and the Scottish Enlightenment: 'Industry, Knowledge and Humanity.'* Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. Pp. ix + 295. ISBN 978-0-7546-6628-8, Cloth. $124.95.

This volume collects ten essays by the distinguished historian Roger L. Emerson. Many are augmented versions of public lectures or conference papers, and all advance Emerson's career-long study of the Scottish Enlightenment, its social foundations, and its institutional embodiments.

Emerson states his case and names his rivals in the anchor piece of the collection, "What is to be Done About the Scottish Enlightenment?" The Scottish Enlightenment, he argues, was a broad-based, indigenous movement of long standing, largely independent of English models. He attacks the view, which he attributes to Nicholas Phillipson (with concurrence in varying degrees from J. G. A. Pocock, John Robertson, and Richard Sher), "that the Scottish Enlightenment was mainly talk about moral, political-economic and social theories produced after c. 1730" (225). Emerson argues for a more inclusive understanding of the Enlightenment as a "wider set of beliefs and activities" that engaged a significant fraction of the educated population of Scotland in the search for "methods that might support improvements of all kinds" (225–26). This movement was well under way by the end of the seventeenth century, and its origins are largely to be found in native Scottish debates over economy and society and in the influence

of continental writers and educational institutions, particularly the professional schools of the Netherlands. To understand this Enlightenment, we must understand the society that made it possible and the men who were its principal creators and disseminators. We must study the experience of students and job-seekers, the world of trade, commerce, and the professions, the institutions of sociability, and perhaps especially the practices of patronage: "Scotland was a society which by the late eighteenth century had been re-oriented by its great patrons and their placemen. The patrons enabled Scots to develop excellent universities strong in the teaching of science and medicine which also turned out men often eager to finance and able to help manage an increasingly vibrant economy" (246). As detailed here and in "How Many Scots Were Enlightened," the Scottish Enlightenment was conservative, shaped by something more than a thousand men who "came from the well-off middle class or were securely attached to the gentry and nobility" (239). These men were "keenly aware of the fragility of civil order," and "willing to secure stability by rougher means than were needed in 'South Britain'" (241). Emerson describes the workings of patronage concretely in an essay on the greatest of the Scottish patrons, "Archibald Campbell, 3rd Duke of Argyll (1682–1761): Patronage and the Creation of the Scottish Enlightenment." This remarkable man, who controlled Crown patronage in Scotland for more than thirty years around mid-century, became "as much the real creator of the Scottish Enlightenment as Sir Robert Sibbald, Francis Hutcheson, or David Hume" (37).

Other essays elaborate these points and put this research program into action. In "The World in which the Scottish Enlightenment Took Shape," Emerson explores the continental roots of Scottish thought and suggests that the Scottish self-image as a backward society in need of improvement had more to do with students' and travelers' experiences of the prosperous cities of the continent than with comparisons with England. He argues that as a society ill-equipped to provide employment for ambitious professionals, Scotland developed an educational system geared to the export market. It was "concerned with the need to prepare young men to leave the country to make their way in a world where their principal assets would be what they knew and could do" (19). Emerson details the adaptation of Scottish education to this end in "What Did Eighteenth-Century Scottish Students Read?" In the lengthy and circumstantial essay "Numbering the Medics," he describes one division of professional education that sent a large fraction of its product abroad and traces the fortunes of a substantial cohort that sought and found opportunity in North America, and in so doing contributed to the diffusion of Enlightenment thought.

What sort of Hume belongs in this picture of the Enlightenment? In a central block of four essays, Emerson presents Hume principally as a writer of history and political economy. "'Our Excellent and Never To Be Forgotten Friend': David Hume

(26 April 1711–25 August 1776)" surveys Hume's career for a general audience. It presents Hume as a man deeply influenced by the shared classical culture of his time but otherwise a puzzle to his contemporaries because of his skepticism and the "prominent place" he assigned "to emotions and feelings and to the imagination" (77). Emerson detects a "tragic" note in many of Hume's writings, echoing personal experiences of depression, disillusionment, and loss of faith (84n25). The long walks, steady work, and good company that eased Hume's pain served as the pattern for his conservative social views. In Emerson's formulation, Hume's maxim was: "Make no rapid changes in manners, beliefs and customs since so much depends on the routines of habit and the common life which we share and assume in our calculations" (81). Hume saw sound political institutions, rather than civic virtue, as the supports of freedom. While he hoped his writings would serve to promote moderation in politics, his outlook was generally pessimistic. He came to believe that he was writing for a declining nation, whose balanced constitution would eventually fall to absolutism or popular agitation. Yet Hume also had his moments of optimism about long-term progress. In the "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," he presented the aspect of a "cautious radical," indeed a republican "who liked small states and local government" (89). Emerson adds in another essay, "A Note on Hume and Political Economy," that this underappreciated piece shows "a Hume who is in principle more egalitarian, republican and even 'Presbyterian' than he usually appears to be" and one who would have been willing to transfer at least some political power from landed to commercial interests (157). Hume also recognized the need for government to intervene in the economy, and would have allowed it "more power than many of his libertarian supporters in the present" (157–58).

Emerson's essay "Hume's Intellectual Development: Part II" supplements, or rather seeks to correct, M. A. Stewart's "Hume's Intellectual Development, 1711–1752" (in *Impressions of Hume*, ed. Marina Frasca-Spada and P. J. E. Kail [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 11–58). Emerson thinks Stewart's account too exclusively focuses on Hume's philosophy, to the neglect of his career as an historian. Emerson chronicles Hume's ever-deepening engagement with the great classical historians, such as Thucydides, Polybius, and above all, Tacitus, but also speculates on what he might have drawn from other sources, beginning with his childhood on the Borders. Hume would have learned something of the Hebrews and the Romans in church and would have absorbed patterns of typological and providential thinking which he would not have questioned until later. As a student destined for the law, Hume could have been exposed to the ideas of the Scots jurists, who saw laws as developing over time in response to social, economic, and political change, and he may have heard something about the lectures of Charles Mackie on Gregory of Tours and the mutual reshaping of Roman and barbarian

culture in the early Middle Ages. By 1730, still quite young, he had read the "most celebrated" Italians, probably Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Sarpi (114). The *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (1741–1742) mention historians of England, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, and Spain, as well as the classics. In the composition of these essays, and in the deep study of history and contemporary politics this occasioned, Emerson finds a training ground for the future historian of England. He speculates that Hume's historical research during this period in his life may account for the astonishing speed with which he produced his magnum opus. Emerson argues that Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Hume independently developed a new model of "holistic" history, in which national character is understood to be the evolving product of dynamic interactions among many factors, including religion, law, politics, economics, manners, and the arts, rather than an enduring essence, as in the works of other historians such as Charles Rollin. An important inspiration for Hume in this regard was his study of Anglo-Saxonists such as George Hickes.

In "Hume's Histories," Emerson treats Hume's philosophy of history. Hume's materials were "the surviving textual and material records of the past" and "our knowledge of the nature of man" (130). The relatively heavy weight that Hume gives to the latter, as acquired in the composition of his philosophy and his essays, means that there is "no firm line between his conjectural, theoretical and the real histories" (136). Our study of the past reveals the operation of general causes. These "can explain some events in some situations but circumstances change and law-like explanations are not always apparent or possible" (152). Cycles, or more accurately patterns of "flux and reflux," can be detected in religion, the arts, and political and economic development. These patterns are interrelated but not fully synchronized. Their general tendency is to "spiral upward," but they do not establish a law of general or inevitable progress. An important exception to the pattern of flux and reflux is the "permanent and stable beliefs of the learned, which Hume seems to have thought had not changed much since the time of Cicero" (138). The course of history and the character of nations are shaped more by the doings of the many than the few. When great men have real effect, it is usually through the creation of enduring institutions.

Emerson's compressed and pithy style packs immense substance into a modest number of pages. Some essays are rich in quantitative detail, others in pointed sententiae that will provoke and reward thoughtful consideration. If there is a fault in this work, it is that Emerson does less than he might to engage closely with the ideas of particular authors, gesturing instead toward broad schools of thought and a myriad of names, some which will be familiar only to a small company of experts. If historians have overrated the importance of English models and English debates in the construction of the Scottish Enlightenment, it is surely because the Scottish and continental authors to whom Emerson alludes are too little known

in Anglo-American circles. To unfold their thought in some modest detail would not only strengthen his case but also begin to remedy this default.

A more generous sampling of specific ideas from specific texts would also help clarify Emerson's broad-based picture of Enlightenment. If every improver—every landlord looking to maximize income, every lawyer joining a debating club, every doctor seeking his fortune in the empire—is to be enlisted under the banner of Enlightenment, the term risks being stretched beyond usefulness. An explicit inventory of the ideas that define Emerson's broad category of improvement would be immensely useful. It would be of particular interest to know what it was in the idea of improvement that could make it the guiding principle of a sweeping intellectual movement. The view that Emerson deprecates—that the Scottish Enlightenment continued an English debate over civic humanism and politeness—has at least this to be said for it: it attributes to the movement an ideal of human excellence that could fire the imagination and be pursued for its own sake. Did some ideal of comparable power inspire, for example, the young men who pursued careers in medicine in numbers far beyond the needs of the local market? If so, does the word 'improvement' quite capture it?

Finally, it must be said that Emerson's block of essays on Hume assorts somewhat ill with the larger group on Scotland at large. As Emerson acknowledges, Hume is an unusual specimen, quite apart from his genius. In particular, the French cast of his education separates him from contemporaries whose training in law or medicine looked to Dutch models. So does the depth of his antipathy to organized religion, which Emerson underplays. Emerson convincingly describes a broad Scottish Enlightenment built by cautious careerists, but Hume risked his career with publications that baffled and provoked. By emphasizing Hume's writings on history and politics, Emerson places Hume somewhat closer to the mainstream of the Scottish Enlightenment he depicts. It might be better, however, to acknowledge that such a singular figure must stand apart from any movement so broadly conceived.

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