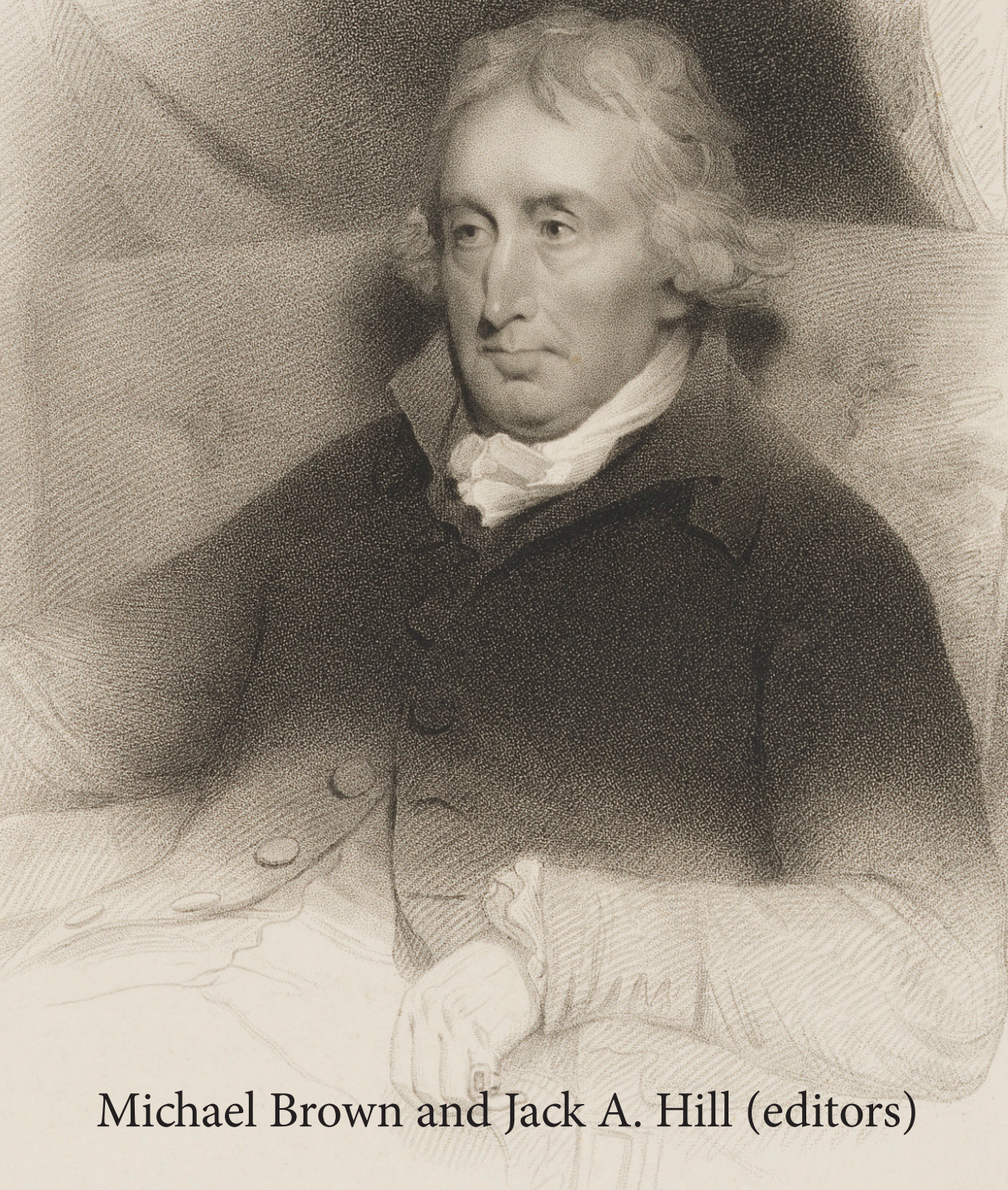


# Adam Ferguson and the Politics of Virtue



Michael Brown and Jack A. Hill (editors)

ADAM FERGUSON  
AND  
THE POLITICS OF VIRTUE



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Edited by  
Michael Brown and Jack A. Hill

With an Introduction by Jack A. Hill

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# Introduction

Jack A. Hill

The Scottish moral philosopher Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) is perhaps one of the most prophetic, yet largely unknown, intellectuals of the modern world. Ferguson came of age during a time which Alexander Broadie has hailed as ‘one of the greatest moments in the history of European culture.’<sup>1</sup> He was a friend, sparring partner and sometimes confidant of the likes of David Hume, Adam Smith, Hugh Blair, William Robertson, Edward Gibbon and Alexander Carlyle. Succeeding Hume as Keeper of the Advocate’s Library, Ferguson became an integral, larger-than-life figure in Edinburgh’s social circles, salons, and societies. He penned numerous political pamphlets, including a hilarious satire on the militia issue. He occupied one of the most prestigious humanities academic positions – Edinburgh University’s Chair of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy (1764–85) – in the United Kingdom. His lectures were all the rage. Writing as early as 1765 from the University of Glasgow, Thomas Reid exclaimed that Ferguson’s moral philosophy class was ‘more than double ours.’<sup>2</sup> Ferguson, who had served nearly a decade as a military chaplain for a Scottish Highlander regiment before moving into academia, was later appointed to a high-stakes British commission in a last ditch effort to broker a compromise with the American congress to keep the American colonies within the British empire.

Yet this social gadfly, political provocateur, university professor, military chaplain and international diplomat was, more than anything else, an uncommonly gifted philosophic thinker and scholar. It is not hyperbole to say that his first major publication, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Historical Age of the Historical Nation* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Reid to David Skene, 20 December 1765, in *The Works of Thomas Reid, with Notes and Supplementary Dissertations, by Sir William Hamilton*, 8th edn (2 vols, Edinburgh: James Thin, 1985), I: 42–43.

(1767), took Europe by storm. It was soon translated into French, German and Italian. It established him as an internationally renowned author and it quickly became a focal point for high praise, as well as collegial jealousy and contentious debate. His *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1769)—sets of lecture notes intended for his students—went through multiple editions and was read in Germany and elsewhere as a standalone text. His six-volume, *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783) was anticipated with some fanfare by none other than Gibbon himself.<sup>3</sup> And what was arguably his most accomplished, although perhaps least read work, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792)—derived from his entire career of re-worked lecture notes—was a consummate ethical treatise on the nature and future prospects of human existence intended, not just for his readers in Europe, but ‘for mankind.’<sup>4</sup>

The reader might justifiably wonder, ‘If Ferguson was such a highly regarded intellectual figure in his own time, why is he practically unknown today?’ This is a complex question, and some of the essays in this book will shed light upon it. Four things should be said at the outset. First, a writer’s energies are frequently misdirected. Time is spent on the envisioned masterwork, but posterity prefers the youthful exuberance of the momentary flourish. The multi-volume edifice with which an author seeks to confirm a literary reputation remains in a state of unrealized gestation, while a sketch is cited as if it were the act of final judgment. Adam Ferguson’s *Essay* is a case in point.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Ferguson was a victim of his own early success. The *Essay* was such an original, provocative treatise that Ferguson’s intellectual identity tended to become almost exclusively associated with it. Moreover, while it was highly esteemed, especially by several famous French and German

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<sup>3</sup> In Gibbon to Ferguson, 1 April 1776, in Vincenzo Merolle, ed., *The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson* (2 vols, London: William Pickering, 1995), I: 138, Edward Gibbon states, with reference to Ferguson’s early draft of his history, ‘you are engaged in a work which I am convinced will stand in the same proportion to my imperfect essay as the Roman Republic may be conceived to have done, if compared with the lower ages of the declining Empire.’

<sup>4</sup> Ferguson states that ‘The Author is sensible that a work of this sort, to be properly executed, ought to be calculated, not for any particular class of readers, but for mankind.’ *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (2 vols, Edinburgh and London: A. Strahan, T. Cadell and W. Creech, 1792), I: 10. This brief sketch of Ferguson’s life and works draws on my recent book, *Adam Ferguson and Ethical Integrity: The Man and His Prescriptions for the Moral Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 1–30.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to my co-editor, Michael Brown, for both the substance and most of the wording of this idea.

scholars, David Hume secretly tried to delay (and perhaps block) its original publication.<sup>6</sup> What was going on?

If the *Essay* is read, as I have argued elsewhere, more as a dialectical discourse which tacks back and forth between the social and moral universes of so-called ‘rude’ and ‘refined’ peoples – than as a linear account of ‘progress’ from barbarous to polished ages – one can better appreciate why Hume and a few commentators had severe reservations about it. In particular, such a reading not only calls into question facile interpretations of progress, but it also harbors radical implications regarding the study of human nature. If, as Ferguson claimed in his early *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy* (1766), ‘Every state in which man can employ his talents, and follow his dispositions, is a state of nature,’ then we moderns (read ‘Lowlanders’) may have much to learn from peoples of the mountains (read ‘Highlanders’).<sup>7</sup> What has been often downplayed or even ignored in Ferguson scholarship, is the role which his upbringing in a bi-lingual context – part Gaelic-speaking and part English speaking, including his years of comradery with mostly Gaelic-speaking, Highlander troops – played in his overall philosophical outlook. Although the thirty-two year-old Ferguson easily assimilated into the erudite society of the Scottish literati, he remained a creature of two very different cultures; codeswitching between the roughhewn, rural Highlands with its heroic strains of oral traditions, and the gentile, urban Lowlands with its polished, though often pretentious, mores and manners. Clearly, some of Ferguson’s Scottish contemporaries were not predisposed to entertain, or see the value of, such a practice.

Nevertheless, by focusing on ‘man’ as a *social* being par excellence, Ferguson’s *Essay* provided insights that *did* become fodder for emerging social scientific inquiry. This had good and bad consequences. On the plus side Ferguson was, as late as 1896, hailed as ‘the father of sociology.’<sup>8</sup> He was ‘re-discovered’ in the twentieth century by North American sociologists, and in recent decades, much of the ‘re-introduction’ of Ferguson – to the extent that he has once again begun to surface as a figure of note – has been the handiwork of sociologists, although historians, literary critics, and a few philosophers

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<sup>6</sup> See my treatment of this issue in *Adam Ferguson and Ethical Integrity*, 42–4.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Ferguson, *For the Use of Students in the College of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid & J. Bell, 1766), 12.

<sup>8</sup> See Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 90. Oz-Salzberger attributes the comment to the Polish theorist of group conflict Ludvik Gumplowicz.

have gotten into the mix.<sup>9</sup> On the downside, Ferguson's other contributions to scholarship have rarely been taken seriously. He had been consigned to an academic niche; namely, to early developments in sociology, and therefore his intellectual legacy has tended to become reduced to his contributions to that discipline. There was certainly, in any event, no Ferguson of any significance to be mined *after the Essay*.

Additionally, there were substantive and stylistic problems with the *Essay* itself. While it contains flashes of genius and some very sharp, witty prose, it is also harbors a number of ambiguities. It is the work of a brilliant but somewhat immature scholar who was still developing his own considered perspectives on the major issues of the day. These ambiguities – for example, uses of terms such as ‘civil society,’ ‘civilized’ and ‘civilization’ – continue throughout his mature literary corpus, but close readings can go a long way toward removing the worst excesses (see in this connection the excellent chapter in this collection by Craig Smith). In any event, given the conceptually ‘unfinished,’ even ‘messy,’ character of the *Essay* – and the young Ferguson's penchant for soaring rhetorical flourishes and occasional biting sarcasm – he has frequently been dismissed as essentially a moralizer rather than as a moral philosopher per se.

Second, beyond the problem of the reduction of Ferguson's scholarly achievement to the *Essay*, his *Principles* have generally been disregarded as simply an elaborate set of lecture notes which, as carefully assembled as they may have been, constitute nothing more than a recapitulation or synthesis of classical or Scholastic positions. This is unfortunate for several reasons. In his *Principles*, Ferguson takes pains to explain that he is not only turning his attention to the widest possible audience – to ‘mankind’ both now and in the future – but that he has treated ‘the history of the species in a different manner’ than in earlier iterations of his lectures. Of particular note, Ferguson consistently begins every major section of the work by situating humans as species beings within the larger order of nature. He adopts a thoroughly empirical, cross-cultural method of investigation into the nature of human beings and their communities. The brief theological references in his early iterations of lecture notes no longer appear in the *Principles*, where Ferguson eschews any focus on ‘sacred’ or revealed religion. He also avoids excursions in metaphysics. In fact, Ferguson's *Principles* is a strikingly modern document

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<sup>9</sup> See notably David Kettler, *Adam Ferguson: His Social and Political Thought*, with a new introduction and afterword by the author (Abingdon-on-Thames, U.K.: Routledge, 2005) which marks the beginnings of this revival of scholarly interest.

which – if read carefully – points to modes of reflection which do not entail undue reliance on metanarratives, while not completely succumbing to cultural relativism. However, because of cursory readings of the work, scholars have failed to appreciate its philosophical significance.

Third, Ferguson may not have helped his cause by being as transparent as he was. He willingly confessed that his intention was not novelty, but benefit to the reader. If the ideas of certain thinkers were of value, it would be inopportune not to incorporate them in one's own thinking. While – in accordance with scholarly protocols at the time – he did not always rigorously cite conventional sources, he does cite many of the more obscure ones, especially from overseas explorers, traders and missionaries. He explicitly signaled his affinities for Stoic philosophical ideas, modes of conduct and dispositions. However, he also emphasized that his consciousness of such affinities was the *result* of deep and wide-ranging inquiries, not a prejudicial, premeditated, point of departure. In large measure, Ferguson's 'originality' surfaces in the relatively unique way he attempts to marshal all of his comparative observations in the service of fashioning a method of ethical inquiry – while providing examples from his own moral quest – that can be of *practical use* for living a good life.<sup>10</sup> While reading Ferguson is not always easy, it is nearly always rewarding, especially for those open to interrogating the norms and values of one's own cultural matrix.

However, such openness to self-interrogation – with what Ferguson referred to as an awareness of our tendency to 'partiality to our kind' – leads to a fourth reason Ferguson is virtually forgotten today.<sup>11</sup> His *Essay* constituted an implicit critique of the very 'polite' social fabric that many of his contemporaries celebrated. It presented a trenchant, at times unflinching, analysis of the dangers of the emerging ethos associated with burgeoning capitalist and commercial economic development in eighteenth-century Europe. And today, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see that this critique also represented a prophetic warning that is difficult to listen to, let alone heed, in the entrepreneurial culture of the twenty-first century. Ferguson's warning comes squarely up against a cultural predisposition – an ideological barrier – to ignore, misconstrue or flatly deny that the growth of capitalism is potentially injurious to the body politic. This predisposition is

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<sup>10</sup> See however Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) for the foreshadowing of this manoeuvre in early eighteenth-century British ethical thought.

<sup>11</sup> Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, I: 6.

extremely difficult to articulate because it draws on discourse which has been unduly politicized, frequently debunked, and simply dismissed by many who have not critically attended to the ancient Socratic dictum: Know Thyself. Three observations on this:

(1) The vast majority of academics in the western world are not sufficiently aware of the degree to which they are ideological captives of elite social locations. Part of the reason is that many have never lived and worked outside the ivory tower, let alone served in the military or worked extensively in economically poor communities. One cannot begin to understand, let alone appreciate, Ferguson unless and until one's thinking is informed by what the Latin American sociologist Otto Maduro described as an 'autocritical' perspective about the various ways in which our social contexts – especially economic and political contexts – predispose us to think in certain ways.<sup>12</sup>

(2) These elite social locations are sustained by a capitalist economic system in which the pursuit of unlimited individual wealth trumps all other values. Today's massive, ever increasing, economic inequality is antithetical to Ferguson's understanding of individual and social well-being. While Ferguson affirmed distinctions in rank and the inevitability of unequal distributions of wealth, he was opposed to inordinate self-indulgence and great disparities of wealth. It is nearly impossible to comprehend, let alone practically appropriate, the ethical thrust of Ferguson's corpus – the political pamphlets, the lectures, the *Essay*, the history of Rome and the *Principles* – if one is uncritically ensconced within an ethos in which wealth is the primary criterion of self-worth and measure of success.

(3) Many of us who might otherwise learn from Ferguson's warnings concerning the dangers of political slavery, live in so-called 'democracies' in which active engagement in civic life has become one option among others, rather than a solemn civic duty. Increasing reliance upon professional militaries, private contractors and lavishly expensive, indirectly deployed, military technologies has distanced average citizens from any martial *esprit de corps* and rendered them more or less isolated, vulnerable and powerless to control the things that matter in their lives. This is a gloomy scenario. We would rather have our (largely misconceived) happy-go-lucky version of Adam Smith, idealistic Karl Marx or even laconic, but comfortably self-indulgent, David Hume. In short, Ferguson is tough going for an increasingly entrepreneurial economy, apathetic citizenry and marginalized academia. Taking Ferguson

<sup>12</sup> See Otto Maduro, *Religion and Social Conflict*, Tr. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982).

seriously means directly facing the dividing issues of our time and many of us, perhaps especially in our academic silos, do not have the stomach for it.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, this book is an effort to re-frame Ferguson scholarship in two senses. First, it is a modest attempt to shed light on what might be termed ‘the mature Ferguson’ or the Ferguson who articulated his thought with the benefit of several decades of hindsight, not only as Professor of Moral Philosophy, but even earlier, as Professor of Natural Philosophy (1759–64). A majority of the essays in this book were originally presented as papers at a symposium entitled, ‘Ferguson *After* the Essay,’ which was held at the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies at the University of Aberdeen, 28 February–1 March, 2014. The idea was to bring together scholars who had an interest in re-thinking Ferguson’s enduring intellectual legacy, particularly his role in the flourishing of the Scottish Enlightenment, the reception of post-*Essay* writings in ensuing years, and his contemporary relevance for moral, political and philosophical thought. The workshop was organized by Professor Michael Brown, Chair of Irish, Scottish and Enlightenment History at the University of Aberdeen and Acting Director of the Research Institute, and by myself, a professor who teaches about social ethics and comparative religion in TCU’s AddRan College of Liberal Arts, who was then the 2013–14 University of Aberdeen Fulbright Distinguished Professor.

Second, the book seeks to create an interpretative space for a diversity of perspectives which take the whole of Ferguson’s scholarly achievement seriously. It not only sheds light on the social and political context – especially the post-*Essay* context – in which Ferguson worked, it also contributes to the examination of Ferguson’s impact on the late Scottish Enlightenment. It is even possible that after reading these essays, the reader will have new vantage points for re-conceptualizing the very meaning of the phenomenon of ‘Enlightenment’. While this collection of essays represents a variety of disciplinary approaches, the thread that unites all of them is a sincere concern for a fresh, in-depth understanding of Ferguson’s thought which does justice to the empirically grounded, morally significant, politically laden, and historically nuanced nature of his intellectual project.

As the reader navigates this volume, two features will become increasingly apparent. First, the multi-disciplinary character of Ferguson’s scholarship

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<sup>13</sup> By ‘dividing issues’ I mean economism, militarism and speciesism. For brief definitions and discussions of these three issues, see Jack A. Hill, *Ethics in the Global Village: Moral Insights for the Post 9-11 U.S.A.* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2008), especially, x–xiii, 1–3, 6–10, 65–73.

– the overlapping nature of what we would today view as separate terrains of academic discourse – tends to require that each author bring a spirit of interdisciplinarity to her or his analysis of Ferguson's work. Second, such interdisciplinarity notwithstanding, the content and foci of individual chapters, considered as parts of a whole, point toward an overarching structure. In the first chapter, Michael Brown captures the logic of this architectonic in his depiction of Ferguson's pedagogy as an integrated evocation of the moral, political and classical historical dimensions of Ferguson's enduring project on the study of human nature. The ensuing chapters, in turn, investigate critical facets of the moral, political and historical character of Ferguson's achievement. In the final chapter, David Allan reflects on the reception of Ferguson's work during his lifetime up to the present day. What might at first glance strike the reader as an eclectic collection of essays, constitutes a unified narrative that in important respects mirrors precisely what Ferguson was trying to accomplish in his various literary activities – including his political pamphleteering, astonishingly fecund *Essay*, early pedagogic texts, seminal *Principles* and his self-described 'MASTERWORK' on the history of Rome.

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In Chapter One ('Politics in the Classroom: Ferguson as a Professor in the Age of Revolution'), Michael Brown integrates the major dimensions of Ferguson's thought by focusing on a key issue at the center of the Scot's intellectual project: 'How might the virtues in rude nations be sustained in polite societies?' As the chapter title implies, Brown approaches this issue in a manner that is particularly mindful of Ferguson's performances as a classroom instructor who is especially intent upon the political education of his students. The virtue sets associated with both rude and refined nations are then adeptly explored in terms of five interrelated segments of the chapter: Militarism, Senates, Oratory, Language and Revolutions.

While Brown pays due respect to the role of martial values in Ferguson's ethical arsenal, he also accents the values of 'senatorial deliberations' and 'intellectual fearlessness' manifest by statesmen in republican, especially aristocratic, forms of governance. This 'second form of courage' (that is, in addition to military courage) necessitates powerful speech-making or oratory (as well as, in literate societies, writing) skills. This insight leads to Brown's third section on the role of oratorical performance in civic political engagement and the virtuous life as a whole. Here, the force of argument, reason, a quality

of communicating, and sobriety are brilliantly exemplified in Ferguson's exaltation of the judicious exertion of each in his writings concerning theatrical production (re: Home's *Douglas*), political negotiation (re: the *Manifesto ... to Members of Congress*) and religious oratory (re: the Sermon in *Ersb* preached to the Black Watch). Whether in theatrical production, political intervention or religious preaching, Brown stresses Ferguson's use of speech to create (and one might add instruct, persuade and inspire) a sense of community and devotion to a common cause.

Moving from this twin focus on oratory as disclosed in both acts of speech and literary performances, Brown turns his attention to Ferguson's understanding of the origins of language and the role language plays in Ferguson's larger perspectives on virtue and politics. He links Ferguson's understanding of the origin of language with the kind of tripartite characterization he attributes to Ferguson's anatomies of government (tyranny, monarchy, republic) and of processes of economic production (hunter/gatherer, agrarian and complex commercial). Humans communicate by the conveyance of mute signs (especially facial expressions), oral vocabularies (nouns, verbs, and other auditory locutions), and written texts. The latter (literary exercises) constitute the basis for the enlargement of vocabularies and the expansion of the presentation of memory and the improvement and extension and use of speech. While Brown emphasizes Ferguson's celebration of the growth and development of language skills – and Ferguson's championing such development as a preeminent sign of progress – he also points out that Ferguson was concerned about the problem of 'linguistic decay.' This leads to the final segment of Brown's argument – a reflection which correlates the linguistic decay with the potential for the eruption of political revolution.

In the case of the American Revolution, Brown shows how Ferguson critiqued what he took to be Richard Price's erroneous use of 'the language of independence which he has taught the Americans.' Because that dispute was an internal scuffle within the rule of the Crown – a national context in which, Ferguson believed, reasonable solutions could be crafted as long as all parties were willing to debate and negotiate in good faith – it was simply counter-productive, if not treasonous, to introduce the language of 'independence' as if such a radical move were necessary or wise. In the case of the French Revolution, Brown shows that Ferguson castigated the 'partizans of bounaparte' for misusing the term 'liberty.' In fact, Ferguson argued, the level of subjugation and political oppression promulgated by the Napoleonic

regime constituted the exact *opposite* of liberty. It represented a linguistic sleight of hand that made a mockery of the actual meaning of the term.

Brown concludes by noting that Ferguson – the moral instructor of students in the service of maintaining a strong civic society – felt compelled to properly prepare his young scholars to become future leaders in a vulnerable, mixed, republican government which was always in the business of crafting a delicate balance between aristocratic and democratic elements. Of utmost importance, Brown observes that a critical element in this preparation was the refinement and practice of oratorical skills – not merely the gaining of aptitude and expertise in the military arts. As he adroitly surmises, the latter were for the young, but the former were especially the province of the aged – who had lived long enough to perfect the rational, logically persuasive, poetically inspiring modes of speech-making that were essential to the guidance of citizens in the fulfilment of their patriotic duties.

Although Brown does not explicitly return to his initial question ('How might the virtues in rude nations be sustained in polite societies?') his chapter implicitly provides the reader with a cogent answer. By focusing on the centrality of orality to communication in civil society, Brown emphasizes an important aspect of political leadership which Ferguson first describes in relation to the oratorical skills of the chief and those in chiefly councils in savage and barbarian societies (*Essay*, 82–87). While in rude nations it is the young and physically strong men who excel in skills of warfare, it is the old who 'employ their natural authority in advising or in prompting the resolutions of the tribe' (*Ibid.*, 84). 'The statesman' Ferguson says, 'is distinguished only by the attention to which his counsel is heard' (*Ibid.*). For such a statesman, 'Power is no more than the natural ascendancy of the mind, the discharge of office no more than a natural exercise of the personal character ...' (*Ibid.*). Hence, Ferguson implies, rhetorical skill combined with what we might term the wisdom of age – which is found wherever human nature flourishes – constitute virtues seen in rude nations which ought to be preserved and practiced in refined ones. If polite societies are to flourish, it will be important to retain something of the recognition of the 'natural authority' of older men (who have experience in having their counsel heard and who manifest an ascendancy of mind) which is simply a given in savage and barbarian societies. In short, virtues associated with oratory in rude nations – age, persuasive words, appeal to common cause, speech reflective of an ascendancy of mind – can be sustained in polite societies if rhetorical arts are sufficiently valued and practiced in the latter.

Perhaps another way of addressing the question of the sustainability of virtue between rude and refined peoples is to begin by fleshing out other virtues which Ferguson believes are intrinsic to human nature wherever it is found. Here we will find, in addition to the instinct for self-preservation and conflict (which Brown stresses) a corollary disposition to association and friendship. Whether savage or polished citizen, humankind are predisposed to displays of public affection, patriotism for their 'tribe,' and acts of compassion and kindness for those who suffer. Other virtues, such as the sobriety and perspicacity of the good chief as well as the good prime minister, are also common to rude and refined peoples alike. Ferguson fears the loss of particular virtues which he associated with savages and barbarians, such as fortitude, honor, generosity, forthrightness, foresight and a spirit of communal solidarity which he believed were threatened by the ethos of a commercial society marked by radical individualism, 'effeminacy' (a weakening of the warrior's 'manly' capacity to endure privations and the absence of bourgeois comforts), and an inordinate preoccupation with gaining and increasing wealth without regard for the suffering of others or one's civic responsibilities to the nation.

One answer regarding the sustainability of these, perhaps more vulnerable, virtues in modern society might entail reacquainting ourselves with a few extraordinary feats of oratory of modern-day descendants of indigenous ('rude?') Pacific Islanders. Those of us who have sat around kava bowls in Tonga, Fiji or Samoa and heard some of the highly respected elders hold forth for extended periods of time – speaking solely from memory, picking each word carefully, blending ancient stories with contemporary events, alternating between humor and somber lament, and all the while commanding the rapt attention of all in attendance – have glimpsed something of the power, majesty and spell-binding character of heroic strains of oratory. Ferguson is not, in other words, referring to some romantic idealization of ancient verse, but rather to countless types of oral traditional performances which most of his contemporaries and even more of us in the twenty-first century have simply never encountered. Yes, we can say with Ferguson that 'man is a poet by nature.' The problem is that the cultural ethos of the modern West – in the grip of entrepreneurial value systems (what I have called elsewhere 'economism') not only no longer recognizes this fact, but disparages the very idea. Rhetoric is no longer taught, let alone appreciated, in most corners of modern society. The progress in the literary arts which Ferguson and the Scottish 'men of letters' enjoined in the eighteenth century is increasingly threatened by the proliferation of communications technology which champions the terse email,

the perfunctory Facebook ‘shout out,’ the Twitter blast and the tweet bleep. A comprehensive answer to Brown’s provocative question will lead us into the kind of full-scale critique of culture in our time which Ferguson attempted in his. This is not to say that the Luddites have the answer. Ferguson himself was certainly a modernist and a progressive, but many questions need to be raised about the use and development of communications technologies in an age in which massive wealth is increasingly concentrated in so few hands and, as Marshall McLuhan would remind us, the medium has literally become the message.<sup>14</sup>

This leads to a final comment regarding Brown’s essay. He refers to two contrasting readings of the background story of the *Essay*. One is the Marxist view that ‘development’ means evolution in terms of changes in the means of economic production. Brown prefers a second reading – the Cambridge School’s concern for viewing that development in terms of changes in formal political structures and jurisprudence. This reading entails distinguishing between categories of peoples based on how they relate to and structure legal systems. The reader might, perhaps, reflect on a third option; namely, that Ferguson combines elements of both of these readings. Clearly, when he distinguishes between rude and refined peoples, Ferguson utilizes the phenomenon of property as a criterion. Yet, at the same time, he also appeals to law as a defining concept. I will conclude my comments on this chapter by exploring potential implications arising from this issue.

First, to the degree that Ferguson’s binary typology of rude and refined people has to do with the significance of the factor of *private property* in evaluating different societies in the history of civil society, it does resonate with Marxian readings of history. While Ferguson is not a materialist (see Michael Hill’s chapter) and does not give pride of place to the means of economic production as the driving forces in the development of the course of history, he does see the manner in which the private acquisition of property can lead to *great* inequalities, and he considers such excessive inequalities (see Alexander Broadie’s chapter) to be one of the leading factors that threaten the viability of republican governments. Perhaps one reason Marx was attracted to Ferguson was that he picked up on the Scot’s fundamental concern about the problematic nature of private property.

In addition to property, as Brown observes, the other concern in Ferguson’s typology pertains to law or juridical systems. This is the part of Ferguson’s

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964).

typology that resonates with the Cambridge School's reading of the Scottish Enlightenment, but for Ferguson it is a precarious and hard won achievement. Polite societies are to be preferred over barbarian ones because one's property rights are protected by law and the property owner can count on a measure of security because of legal statutes and the probability of legal redress if his rights are infringed upon. On the other hand, Ferguson emphasizes the fact that laws on paper are only as good as the officials and magistrates who execute and adjudicate them. Iain McDaniel has established, in this connection, that Ferguson did not simply reiterate Montesquieu's view that the sentiments of legislators are expressive of the manners of the people.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, in a context of great economic inequality, the sentiments of legislators are prone to defer to those of the wealthiest elites. Or, should a populist get control, the actual manners of the people may be ignored in a turn toward despotism. Ferguson did not share Montesquieu's optimism about the strength of the balance of power between legislators and the people. His impulses were to cast a wary eye on the power of the people.

Ferguson also thought that simply having a law or constitution in place does not guarantee that the law or constitution will be applied fairly. The other threat to political stability in a republic, in addition to great inequalities of wealth, is the unfair application of law. In Ferguson's analysis, when one of these trajectories – either great inequalities of wealth or systemic injustice in the application of law – becomes manifest, a degree of corruption sets in that tends to reinforce the other trajectory, resulting in the eventual collapse of republican governance itself.

One curious takeaway is that the savage – who does not exercise significant private property ownership rights or act within a complex legal system – is, by virtue of the lack of these types of exertions, also exempt from the worst excesses of the barbarian and the polished gentleman; namely, the savage does not experience great inequalities of wealth or the imposition of systemic injustices. This point is crucial because Ferguson has been accused of romanticizing the savage. Nothing could be further from the case. Ferguson describes acts of brutality, cruelty and deceit perpetrated by savages on one another.<sup>16</sup> His point is a sociological one. Morally speaking, the savage native

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<sup>15</sup> See especially McDaniel's arguments in the first two chapters of *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 229–30.

is no better, but also *no worse* than the polite native. The savage lives a hard life. No one in their right mind who has experienced the conveniences of modernity would want to live like a savage. And yet, the savage can also survive circumstances that would overwhelm his modern counterpart. What Ferguson is driving at is that in modern commercial society – partly because it is so captivated by private property and controlled by complex legal structures – the likelihood of abuse regarding economic inequality and political injustice increases exponentially with the passage of time. The fact of this likelihood means that the citizen must be ever more vigilant regarding his or her own preoccupation with wealth and with incidences of unjust application of force.

In Chapter Two ('Adam Ferguson: Moral Science and Moralizing'), Craig Smith directs our attention to core philosophical expressions of the moral dimension of Ferguson's project. Smith contributes an extremely subtle, textual analysis which examines the philosophical coherence (and at times apparent incoherence) of Ferguson's understandings of 'science,' 'moral science,' and 'moral philosophy.' Grounding his inquiry in a close reading of key sections of Ferguson's expressly philosophical writings – *Analysis, Institutes, Principles* – Smith shows how Ferguson's thinking about these terms is a shifting work in progress. Near the end, focusing on the problem of how descriptive claims can constitute a foundation for normative assertions, Smith contends that Ferguson's characterization of moral science can be construed as avoiding the worst excesses of the 'Is-Ought' fallacy. Although Smith concedes that Ferguson's own solution to the problem is not entirely persuasive, he does a stellar job of elucidating Ferguson's negotiation of the relationship between descriptive and normative modes of inquiry.

One of the factors that Ferguson stresses from the outset is that human beings do make – and in fact always have made – moral judgments. In describing the facts of human nature, one necessarily is describing a nature in which there are 'facts' concerning sets of human moral beliefs and scenarios of human moral conduct. That is, descriptive statements about human beliefs are, to varying degrees, laden with normative content. Smith highlights the sense in which Ferguson studiously avoids identifying any one or set of these actual beliefs as expressed in a particular society or culture with what one necessarily ought to believe. The conundrum is that Ferguson also thinks that there really are moral norms and values. They have a reality-sense all their own. They underlie the surfaces of conventional morality, can be constructed by the agent who acts as a good person, or are simply intuitively acted upon by the good person. In other words, there is what one might call a 'normativity' out

there. Ferguson hovers over it, circles it, but only zooms in on it in metaphorical ways. This can be highly evocative for moral awareness, but it can also be quite frustrating for actual moral discernment.

Smith also guides the reader into additional philosophical quagmires. He notes that part of what Ferguson wants to claim is that ordinary persons in common life can make crystal clear moral judgments without the benefit of deep-level moral philosophical reflection. If this is the case, Smith asks, ‘Then what is the point of moral science?’ If nothing else, one such as Ferguson must do moral science in order to correct erroneous or simply mistaken modes of reasoning. In a Wittgensteinian mode, the wise philosopher’s task is to assemble careful reminders. For example, Smith quotes Ferguson’s famous passage in the *Principles* about the confusion which is incurred by those who take the distinction between physical and moral science ‘from the subjects to which they relate, not from the objects to which they are directed.’ Physical science inquiry about ‘man’ concerns attaining knowledge about who we are. Moral science inquiry is aimed at who we ought to be. Doing moral science correctly is in part necessary (at least in rarified circles of polite society) to prevent discourse from going down rat holes and to re-direct it toward clarifying what the common man of good sense already has an intuitive awareness of, but has not articulated for himself. There may also be a felt need, for those such as Ferguson who are prone to contemplate such matters, to try their best to re-establish the ground of normativity in an age of rapid social change and moral relativity.

To tease out another example, Smith interrogates Ferguson’s use of the terms ‘moral philosophy.’ Smith questions whether Ferguson thinks moral philosophy is synonymous with ‘moral science,’ is an application of moral science, or is even in some odd sense an aspect of moral science. He intimates that Ferguson himself is not of one mind on this issue. Perhaps the ‘moral science’ in the title of Ferguson’s culminating work, *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, is a preeminent feature of ‘moral philosophy’ construed as including not only political science, but physical science as well. Or, having read and setting aside the *Principles*, the moral agent then does moral philosophy by considering how to apply the method sketched in the book to her or his own particular circumstances. The reader of the *Principles* has to search the crevices of the landscape to fasten onto any specific moral action guides. Ferguson is quite serious when he tells students that he will provide a method, but that they will have ‘to perform the work’ for themselves.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the doing of such

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<sup>17</sup> Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, I: 4.

work in one's own individual life is what Ferguson means by moral philosophy.

In Chapter Three ('Sovereign of the Sea': Adam Ferguson on Britain's Empire), Anna Plassart reflects on Ferguson's understanding of virtue by examining the relationship between antiquity and modernity and the nature of empire. In the process, she provides a fresh, compelling, and novel account of the complexity of the essential coherence of Ferguson's negotiation of Scottish Enlightenment ideas of progress with ancient ideals of classical virtue. Plassart also counters caricatured accounts of Ferguson as a backward-looking, nostalgic, classical republican who was out of step with contemporary political thinking. As she observes, 'just as Smith highlighted the drawbacks and risks' associated with commercial society, Ferguson warned his contemporaries about the dangers inherent in 'the popular politics and military aggression he associated with ancient Roman history.' Moreover, Plassart contends, Ferguson 'fully appreciated' some of the advantages associated with the progress of modern commercial society. Not only was he not surprised or confused by the flash of military aggressiveness exercised by French revolutionaries, but he saw this burst of martial virtue as an opportunity for Britain to reassert military values in defense of its well-established mixed constitutional, commercial, society.

Drawing on incisive readings of Ferguson's later correspondence in tandem with his earlier published works, Plassart introduces the reader to a fascinating account of Ferguson's evolving (and increasingly nuanced) perspective on imperial rule – from his professorial appointments at Edinburgh University (1760s–1780s) to the early years of the nineteenth century. At the outset Plassart explains why it is erroneous to argue – as some scholars have – that Ferguson's critique of empire was contradicted by his personal involvement in British imperial policy. While duly acknowledging Ferguson's many interconnections with British imperial policy – including current and former students who would become imperial administrators, relatives whom he assisted in obtaining positions in the Empire and his own interests in India and the East India Company – Plassart observes that Ferguson distinguished between at least two different categories of empire. Some were continental, land-based (Napoleonic) and global, sea-based (Dutch & British) imperial adventures, while others were the commercial 'federations' (early Greco-Roman, and later European, amalgamations of nations) championed by Montesquieu. The former, if not carefully constrained, were prone to despotism. Ferguson favored the latter though he valorized qualities – affinities for the noble, majestic, exalted, regal and royal – that are connoted by the term 'imperium.'

Plassart observes that these federal unions could constitute reservoirs of virtue by uniting individual nations into a relatively peaceful, yet large, political entity in which each could retain enough independence to counter the corrosive effects typically assumed to be manifest in traditional despotic empires, whether of land or sea.<sup>18</sup> The key for Ferguson was the need to strike a balance between being too small and defenseless (vulnerable to subjugation) and too large, powerful and proud (likely to subjugate others). Plassart thus explicates the thrust of Ferguson's oft quoted dictum about imperial rule – that to be conquered and to conquer amount to the same thing – in an illuminating and plausible manner.

Plassart next argues that Ferguson's view of the co-existence of federal unions and martial virtue was buttressed by what she views as Ferguson's 'idealized' notion of the 'simple but virtuous and martial' Scottish Highlander. Although the reader might quarrel with her characterization of Highlanders as 'simple' peoples, Plassart is no doubt correct in implying that Ferguson was convinced that Scottish Highlanders exuded a moral ethos that was in some respects superior to that found in urbane, European metropolitan centers.

In the last half of the chapter, Plassart turns her attention to Ferguson's thoughts about, and engagements with, both the American and French Revolutions. She makes a robust case that Ferguson's experience on the Carlisle Commission did not soften his critique of empire. Rather, she contends, it reinforced his hope that – in spite of the American colonists' sense of entitlement and their dogged refusals to exhaust all paths of legislative reform – Britain could maintain a non-despotic federal empire of the sea. What the American revolt did do was force Ferguson to rethink and revise his earlier appropriation of Montesquieu's more peaceful, federal concept of empire. After the American revolt, Ferguson pivots toward the notion of a unified imperial center in which independent states are more tightly yoked together. The American revolt was symptomatic of an emerging global political power dynamic. If Britain was to survive in this new, modern, worldwide commercial arena, it needed to consolidate and strengthen its defense capabilities. Nevertheless, Ferguson still believed that it was possible to maintain free constitutional or mixed governments within an empire marked by, to borrow a scientific metaphor, greater centrifugal force.

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<sup>18</sup> Plassart notes that she draws on the expression 'reservoir of virtue' as employed in Michael Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland' in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 137.

Turning to the French Revolution, Plassart argues, against Kugler, that the rise of France's republican army was not so much emblematic of the ancient martial spirit and virtue – though Ferguson initially expressed something of this sentiment in his correspondence – as much as it exemplified territorial expansion and aggressive imperialism.<sup>19</sup> As Plassart portrays Ferguson's view, the French moved quickly from something like the vibrancy and spirit of early Roman republicanism to despotism, all within a generation. The French revolution essentially repeated – in fast forward mode – the scenario of corruption and termination that marked the Roman Republic. Consequently, when viewed alongside Britain's polite, constitutionally grounded, commercial empire, Napoleon's despotic empire paled by comparison.

The rest of the chapter provides a detailed account of how Ferguson sought to inculcate martial values and a 'national spirit' in the British populace, while at the same time warning against a new threat to the moral – and ultimately political – sustainability of the empire; namely, the campaign to 'rule the waves' and thus institute a naval, oceanic version of the, land-based, aggressive, territorial overreach of Napoleon. Although Ferguson clearly believed that the British Empire was a necessary evil, the way forward also necessitated perspicacity regarding the need to resist greed for universal maritime domination, a monopoly of trade, and the dissipation of a military spirit.

Plassart thus demonstrates how Ferguson remained an acute observer of international affairs throughout the age of revolutions: warning of how both ancient and modern models of empire carried the seeds of their own destruction. Perhaps one takeaway for geo-politics in the twenty-first century is Ferguson's concerns about what Plassart terms 'corrupting monopolies run by metropolitan-based merchants.' Indeed, Plassart provides contemporary political scientists with much food for thought as they struggle with what Ferguson may well have feared – an increasing dominance of military-backed, transnational corporate entities who are capable of operating as sovereigns over both land and sea.

In Chapter Four ('Ferguson, Slavery and the Scottish Enlightenment's Argument for Opposing Abolition') Glen Doris focuses on a morally charged, political issue within the empire. In a well-documented account, he investigates the enigma of why Ferguson – like many of the Scottish literati – did not engage in advocacy concerning the Abolitionist movement. Doris contends

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 141.

that Ferguson did not add his voice to the Abolitionist cause, in part, because of theological beliefs. Since Ferguson believed that the Divine hand of God was in charge of governing human affairs, God would ‘dissolve obstacles to social progress.’ Following Ronald Hamowy, Doris also argues that Ferguson presupposed a notion of ‘spontaneous order.’<sup>20</sup> Doris then contends that when the notion of spontaneous order is taken together with an ideology of stadialism, what results is an effective philosophical rationale for those opposing Abolition. Both arguments have their merits and Doris is to be commended for posing the tough question of the complicity of Ferguson and other Scottish literati in lending support – whether intentionally or negligently – to those who opposed the abolition of slavery. As with other essays in this book, Doris’ provocative chapter raises several questions for further reflection and research.

One issue pertains to how Ferguson’s view of providence is to be understood, and how that understanding may or may not be a factor in Ferguson’s political views. Clearly, Ferguson believed in a divine Author of Nature and that nature itself reflected the handiwork of its author. But it was a dynamic, not a static, handiwork. He believed that growth and change were emblematic of nature. Regarding human nature, Ferguson thought that proper ‘order’ entailed – as Brown’s and Broadie’s essays make clear – debate, disputation and dissent – not passive acquiescence to the inherited status quo. When it came to articulating the nature of Nature, Ferguson preferred organic, rather than mechanistic metaphors. Regarding purely instinctual behavior, he refers to the then commonplace metaphor of the honey comb and the honey bee. However, when it comes to his characterization of man – as Doris himself puts it – Ferguson thinks in terms of an artificer who is fashioned to invent and create.

The jury is out in Ferguson scholarship concerning the degree to which man, viewed as a radically free moral agent, is subject to manipulation or direction by the hand of God. While there appears to be some consensus about the role of the idea of an ‘invisible hand’ in Adam Smith’s thinking about the development of social and economic institutions – and Doris devotes considerable space to discussing Smith’s understandings in this connection – the reader may wonder whether Ferguson’s views should necessarily be equated with those of Smith. Late in the *Essay* Ferguson makes the often neglected point that ‘the commercial arts ... must perish under the precarious tenure of

<sup>20</sup> See Ronald Hamowy, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Theory of Spontaneous Order* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

slavery, and under the apprehension of danger arising from the reputation of wealth.<sup>21</sup> For Ferguson, it is more likely that continued economic progress in eighteenth-century Britain was incompatible with the continuation of chattel slavery, not because God would ‘dissolve’ it, but because it was logically incompatible with the robust development of the commercial arts. This line of argument can be identified through a close reading of Ferguson’s anatomy of the arts in the *Principles*.<sup>22</sup>

At least three other issues merit brief comment. Ferguson’s reluctance to advocate for abolition may have had biographical, social location and deeper ideological causes. First, two of his siblings spent several years in Jamaica and may have been directly or indirectly involved in the slave trade. Second, as Doris notes, Ferguson was a member of Edinburgh’s societal elite. As Ferguson himself was acutely aware, social location, especially one’s associations with others – in addition to personal qualities and various circumstances outside of one’s control – influence how one applies moral insights in one’s own social situation. Ferguson, even though part Highlander by upbringing, was a moderate Whig, and may not for the most part have moved in social circles predisposed to scholar activism, his strong role in advocacy for the militia cause notwithstanding. This brings us to a third point. When it came to government legislation, Ferguson was deeply suspicious of zealous reformers, partly because of the argument Doris explicates – that we simply cannot anticipate many of the consequences of specific reform initiatives. Near the end of his *Principles* Ferguson states: ‘When a people is orderly, and affairs proceed with little interposition of government, we may be apt to imagine that they might do without it: But the happiest effect of government is to prevent disorders, not to redress them.’<sup>23</sup> As a professional moral philosopher and scholar of ‘the study of man,’ Ferguson generally had his eye on the big picture, the larger

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<sup>21</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 263.

<sup>22</sup> See especially, *Principles* I: 190–255. In his published works, Ferguson was quite clear that he opposed the phenomenon of chattel slavery – not merely the broader phenomenon he termed ‘political slavery’ – in his lectures and in the *Essay*. In the *Analysis* he states: ‘No right to service can amount to property in the person of the servant: slavery therefore has no foundation in justice’ (Ferguson, *Analysis*, 44). Commenting on the institution of slavery among the ancient Grecian states in the *Essay*, Ferguson laments: ‘We feel its injustice; we suffer for the helot, under the severities and unequal treatment to which he was exposed;’ and adds that while he and his eighteenth-century compatriots may identify with the ‘superior order’ of men in ancient city-states that ‘we are apt to forget, like themselves, that slaves have a title to be treated like men.’ (Ferguson, *An Essay on The History of Civil Society*, 177).

<sup>23</sup> Ferguson, *Principles* II: 483.

arc of developments in the ongoing history of civil society. It might be said that he was intent on preventing the worst catastrophes, not trying to make an imperfect world less imperfect. By prompting a re-examination of all of these issues, Doris has provided an invaluable service to Ferguson scholarship.

In Chapter Five ('Adam Ferguson on Sparta, Rome and the Fragility of Civil Liberties'), Alexander Broadie puts Ferguson's concerns regarding the cultivation of a zealous civic republicanism and a concomitant avoidance of descent into despotism – which Ferguson forcibly articulates in the *Essay* – in the larger context of Ferguson's varied life experiences, study of classical literature and his later scholarship on the history of Rome. It is both a masterful exposition of the ethical and political thrust of Ferguson's oeuvre and an unflinching, direct call for civic engagement in our own time. The interpretive power and overall persuasiveness of Broadie's analysis is rooted in his emphasis on three aspects of Ferguson's biography which are not usually viewed together: his strong academic background in the classics of antiquity; his nine-year stint as chaplain to a military regiment; and his upbringing as a thoroughgoing Calvinist in the Kirk. Although this chapter focuses on the first of these influences, it is also highly suggestive for further research on the latter two. One way to foreground the unique value of Broadie's essay is to explore aspects of these latter two influences in further detail.

Ferguson's first-hand military experience, viewed in the context of his later, sometimes strident, advocacy for the militia cause and life-long commitment to moral virtues such as courage, discipline and fortitude, is a facet of his life that has still not received adequate attention in Ferguson scholarship. It is often hardly mentioned, and when alluded to at all, quickly passed over. It is quite possible that part of the problem may be that very few Ferguson scholars have served in the military, or have had intimate acquaintance with it by way of friendships with veterans. Another potential factor is that some Ferguson scholars – at least in North America – came of age during the Vietnam War when there was a great deal of antipathy toward what was then called 'the military-industrial complex.' Rather than a protector or defender, the U.S. military was often perceived as an incarnation of some dangerous, even malevolent, force that should be downsized and carefully monitored.

Following the Vietnam War and the termination of the draft, a professional army emerged which was increasingly staffed by those in the lower economic echelons of society. Many of these soldiers began to see the armed services as a viable, and relatively secure, career path rather than as a temporary sojourn in the service of the country. This is not to say that many if not most military

personnel do not view their employment as a bona fide commitment to patriotic service – I believe they do – but rather that such employment is clearly of a mixed character, now that good paying jobs in the civilian sphere are scarce unless one has the education, opportunities and hiring networks that are associated with the upper economic echelons of the country. Finally, during the past two decades, with the acceleration of the use of advanced technology in military operations – for example, the increasing deployment of drones and reliance on unmanned aircraft and missile systems – the role and status of the traditional ‘foot soldier’ has been relegated to the margins of military endeavors. In this new ‘technologized’ military world, Broadie’s appeal to Ferguson’s ‘on the ground’ military experience might strike some readers as anachronistic.

However, one of Broadie’s central contentions is that what is under threat in the polished societies of Ferguson’s day is the ethos and *esprit des corps* spawned by the kind and quality of comradery that Ferguson no doubt experienced in the Black Watch and discovered in his researches on Sparta and the early Roman Republic. It is the essential ‘equality’ of interaction that is manifest within, albeit hierarchically structured, martial communities – the all for one and one for all ethos of the Highland clan where the commoner obeys, but is not deferential to, the chief. It is the equal standing among all Spartan warriors, any one of whom could aspire to be, but could not long remain, a commander of others.

Second, in addition to his accenting of Ferguson’s military background, Broadie calls attention to Ferguson’s Calvinist roots. Although Broadie does not develop the ‘bottom up’ character of Presbyterian polity in this chapter, the implications are clear from his central argument. While Ferguson’s week to week involvement in church life remains something of a mystery, Richard B. Sher has documented how Ferguson actively and frequently participated as a voting member in annual, national Assemblies of the Church of Scotland.<sup>24</sup> By referencing Ferguson’s participation in the life of the Kirk, Broadie calls attention to what the reader might consider as the essentially *democratic* nature of the Presbyterian form of governance. It entails not only a bottom up system of representation – from local parish, through Presbytery and Synod, to the Assembly level – but it stresses the use of the very kinds of debate and rhetorical skills which Broadie justifiably views as hallmarks of

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<sup>24</sup> See Sher’s classic work, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press and Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985; Edinburgh Classic Edition, with a new preface, 2015).

civic engagement in a truly vibrant republic. In this sense, his chapter has important implications for further research on how social interaction in religious institutions – and in today’s proliferation of fledgling spiritualist enclaves – may or may not enhance civic engagement, especially as it pertains to well-reasoned, logically coherent, and rhetorically persuasive argumentation in the public sphere.

In Chapter Six (“The Scientific Historian: Epistemology and Politics in Adam Ferguson’s *Progress and Termination*”), Xandra Bello considers the role of this qualitative experience in Ferguson’s writing of history. She argues that Ferguson succeeds in writing history to teach moral and political lessons in ways that are aesthetically accessible, and yet faithful to the spirit of Baconian empiricism. This is an unusually complex maneuver. The key to Bello’s creative analysis is her understanding of Roman history as epitomizing both the heights and depths of human flourishing in civil society. The telling of the story functions, for Ferguson, as the primary way of dramatically conveying – in a reader-friendly manner – the thrust of his own intellectual project – the moral and political edification of students. In his writing of history, Ferguson both achieved a high level of objectivity while simultaneously engaging the listener in a subjectively powerful artistic experience.

Ferguson has been criticized for numerous historical *faux pas*, including mistakes in dating and an over reliance on the accounts of ancient historians. He utilized those accounts in ways that later historians would view as taking creative license in his depictions of motives and dispositions and interpolations of commentary on source materials. Bello counters that Ferguson was engaged in a special kind of historiography, which entailed novel epistemological assumptions. First, he was not strictly intent upon writing a linear history. Though his account roughly parallels standard chronologies of the inception of the Republic down to the empire of Caesar, Ferguson was not striving for the kind of quantitative accuracy regarding dating that is simply taken-for-granted by today’s historians. Second, Bello contends that Ferguson viewed historical writing as a means of educating the reader about what it meant to live a moral life and to be a model citizen.

Third, and most importantly, Bello argues that Ferguson as historian was functioning both as a scientific reporter far removed from the bustle of Rome *and* as morally engaged guide for contemporary readers. By steeping himself in the supposedly first-hand, eye-witness accounts of the ancients, Ferguson sought to immerse himself in the real life experiences of those he was describing. This kind of intimate journeying into the subjectivities of the actors

of the story was Ferguson's way of closing the epistemological gap between distant, detached and abstract modern interpretations of ancient events and close, engaged and concrete representations of those events. Ironically, in Ferguson's view, the latter approach yielded a more empirically solid, more objective iteration of the *spirit* and *sense* of events than what the historian could ascertain by employing more indirect, dispassionate, quantitatively precise, analytic tools and methods. In this sense, Ferguson believed himself to be fulfilling the thrust of Bacon's concern for *observation* to elicit the facts where specifically *human* action – which entailed taking the measure of human subjectivities – was concerned. Such assessments involved much more than cataloging quantitative factors (like dates, financial transactions, or census counts).

This is where history writing as the presentation of the tragic character of the human predicament becomes especially relevant. By focusing on the extraordinary story of Rome as emblematic of the heights and depths of human history, wherever it unfolds, Ferguson accomplishes twin objectives. First, he provides a lively, strikingly realistic, representation of the vicissitudes of human history. Second, as a master story-teller, Ferguson empowers readers to imaginatively participate in that history as if they had been actually present. As Bello emphasizes, by entering into an aesthetic telling of the tragedy that befell Rome, Ferguson's readers are enabled to 'recognize traces of themselves.' Given his concern for scientific accuracy, Bello appears to argue that Ferguson did not expressly write history itself as playwrights construct theatrical tragedy, but he does seem to be doing something very close to the latter. As Bello implies, Ferguson's history of Rome poses provocative epistemological questions about the role of aesthetic truth in providing a truly *scientific* account of human history and of the nature of human being.

In this connection, Ferguson was well aware of the importance of oratory for moral and political education, as Michael Brown's chapter discloses. Similarly, Bello goes a long way toward establishing Ferguson's commitment to both scientific observation and creative story-telling as pedagogical resources. In the process, she provides seeds for further reflection on the extent to which Ferguson was embarked upon an alternative historiography. Recall Ferguson's famous remark about Roman history in *Progress and Termination* (which Bello quotes): 'To know it well, is to know mankind and to have seen our species under the fairest aspect of great ability, integrity and courage.'<sup>25</sup> By framing

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1: 3–4.

humankind's most emblematic story in terms of the majestic rise and crushing fall of the Roman Republic, Bello shows how Ferguson captures the sense and spirit of human flourishing in ways that hold out the possibility of enhanced moral and political awareness, even in the midst of historical decline and decay.

In Chapter Seven ('Census and Sensibility: Quantitative Difference in Ferguson's *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*'), Mike Hill addresses the issue of civic engagement from a different angle. Hill explores the possibilities of translating Ferguson's approach to historiography in *Progress and Termination* into the discourse of the digital humanities. He concentrates on the fact that Ferguson uses the terms 'number' and 'numbers' 220 times in *Progress and Termination*. He claims not only that Ferguson was himself preoccupied with using nomenclature and categories associated with quantitative analysis, but that Ferguson employed something of a quantitative method in his scholarly work and only 'begrudgingly' made an aesthetic turn in some of his writings. While such claims are controversial, this chapter is an intriguing, deep-level exposition which takes what Hill terms 'Fergusonian numbers' seriously. It opens up Ferguson scholarship to provocative questions about the interrelationship of quantitative and qualitative types of inquiry, as well as the relationship of these approaches to research and a plethora of other binary distinctions – such as the political versus the epistemic, the bustle of political force versus the passivity of book learning, war and conflict versus philosophy, society versus war, matter versus mind, objects versus subjects, and popular force versus writing.

Additionally, and perhaps equally important, the chapter enhances our understanding of at least three aspects of Ferguson's intellectual project; namely, that (1) modern commercial societies contain the seeds of social disorder, (2) the domains of political power and commercial self-interest should not be bifurcated, and (3) need takes priority over law, especially in highly conflictual situations of inequality. According to the thrust of Hill's chapter, greedy corruption, unseemly emoluments, and the emergence of 'great inequalities of fortune' – when united with political corruption – are conducive to a 'dictatorship of the rich' which inevitably results in the collapse of civil society. Hill stresses the point that the 'coming dictatorship,' though 'not too distant,' is 'rather too close for us to take much notice.' The 'lesson' to be gleaned from Ferguson's intellectual project, Hill surmises, is that a society which is 'organized fundamentally around possessive self-interest' is doomed

from the beginning.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, Hill contends that *Progress and Termination* is primarily about continuing to teach ‘the lesson’ of the *Essay* – and thus should be read as integrally part of one coherent, politically explosive, intellectual project.

Second, in addition to emphasizing that Ferguson avoids the bourgeois pretense of turning a blind eye to the politically volatile nature of commercial society, Hill points out that Ferguson consistently resists the bifurcation of politics and economics. As Hill stipulates, these two forces – political power and commercial self-interest – ‘either collide or produce unholy unions’. They are not divisible or complimentary. They are certainly not as *manageable* as liberal models of social change would suggest. While Hill implies that Ferguson never persuasively resolved the tension at play – in his terminology, between devising a method of multiplying and the sense of the people – it is clear that Ferguson’s work is expressive of a strong preference: In the good society, self-interest and a concomitant disposition for conflict (which are always critical aspects of human nature) must ultimately be subservient to the proper exercise of political power. Such an exercise instills virtue and is never the sole function of one person or one party.

Third, Hill does an excellent job of establishing that for Ferguson, when push comes to shove, need trumps law. ‘Need’ – which Hill expresses in terms such as ‘extreme necessity’ and ‘the instinct of nature’ – is justifiably exercised in situations of brutal inequality. And, for Ferguson, in more pacific, less extraordinary circumstances – as Hill appears to argue as well – natural right is protected *by* natural law, not subsumed by it. The assertion of natural rights relates to the central role which the concept of ‘exertion’ plays in Ferguson’s moral science. Returning to Hill’s reference to the ‘irruption’ mentioned in Ferguson’s epigram, Ferguson says that during this period, ‘human nature languished for some time under a suspension of natural exertions.’<sup>27</sup> The key problem which the tandem of commercial self-interest and political corruption

<sup>26</sup> This may help explain why Karl Marx, who viewed Adam Smith as a ‘fatalist,’ was so apparently enamored with Ferguson (see Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, with an introduction by Friedrich Engels [New York: International Publishers, (1847) 1963], 123–24). Marx sensed that Ferguson was saying something much more radical about the moral and political implications of the unbridled expansion of the commercial arts in the eighteenth century, than many recognized then or now. Being held captive in an ideological iron cage of one’s own making, consumer beings are already simply too close to a condition of political enslavement to economic despots to be able to appreciate the true nature of their circumstances.

<sup>27</sup> Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, six books in 1 vol. (Reprint, London: Jones and Company, 1829 [1783]), 481.

present to modernity is that they shut down the natural expression of these exertions – they inhibit genuine human flourishing. This is Ferguson’s chief worry, and it constitutes the core of his ‘lesson’ for eighteenth-century readers as well as for humankind in all ages.

Perhaps the whole matter of quantification – of calculation, counting, measuring and enumerating – functions more in Ferguson’s work as an essential element of historical narration, or as a means of abstract categorization which is useful for organizing data, rather than as generative of explanatory rubrics which provide meaningful interpretations *of* the data. Regarding multiplying methods, Ferguson may simply be concerned with describing a methodology utilized by the Romans, not with devising a quantitative method in connection with his own writing. Although Hill may not be making this claim, he may well be leading us to a deeper appreciation of the manner in which Ferguson joins quantitative data (census counts, amounts of money and property values) with imaginative, qualitative experiences (force, sense, will and desire) which rise, as Nietzsche would remind us, to the highest pinnacles of the human spirit.

In Chapter Eight (“People Who Live Long Like Me must Be content To Be the Last:’ Multiple Fergusons Beyond the Essay”), David Allan provides an overview of how Ferguson – as sociologist, historian and moral philosopher – was received by his contemporaries as well as by future generations. It is an extremely well-documented, thoughtful reflection on how Ferguson was perceived as both a scholar and as a symbolic personification of all the Scottish Enlightenment represents. As the chapter title indicates, it is also notable for its concentration on Ferguson’s writings *after* the *Essay*. Allan focuses on three of the most prominent legacies of Ferguson’s scholarly profile: the nascent sociologist, the historian of Roman history, and the professor of moral philosophy. In each case, Allan shows how Ferguson’s scholarship – especially in social science and history writing – was at first well-received and even highly praised by many, yet tended to receive significantly less attention in the later stages of his long life and for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Allan concludes, however, that Ferguson’s reception as personally emblematic of the multi-faceted literary, social and scientific achievement of the Scottish Enlightenment is perhaps his most notable attainment. Allan’s extended quotation from Henry Cockburn’s *Memorials* captures the sense in which Ferguson can be viewed as a pre-eminent embodiment of that Enlightenment, despite the factual errors in Cockburn’s portrayal. In all respects, Allan’s is a highly nuanced account that draws upon details disclosed in Ferguson’s correspondence and published works, as well as a wealth of knowledge

about the social and intellectual histories of the Scottish Enlightenment and subsequent eras. As such, it is generative of many suggestions for further comment and research both within the orbit of Scottish Enlightenment studies and the broader field of the history of ideas.

A great deal of the recent interest in Ferguson has focused on the import of his first major scholarly performance – the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* – for the emergence of sociology as a distinct social science discipline: Allan’s account of the *Essay*’s immediate reception drills down on some heretofore largely underdeveloped particulars. Of special note is the ambiguity surrounding both David Hume’s view of the *Essay* and his communications with Ferguson and others about the *Essay*. Allan implies that there is still much here that remains unexplored. He describes Hume’s efforts to ‘flatter’ Ferguson in personal correspondence. But the ‘flattery’ of the highly sensitive outsider – who was at the time still a relative newcomer to Edinburgh’s literary scene – is double-edged. As Allan subtly observes, Hume initially dwells on positive reviews of *Scottish* readers in the London vicinity, not on those of the English intelligentsia. It is as if Hume is saying, ‘Good job, Ferguson, your fellow (arguably somewhat parochial) Scots like you.’

As Allan also notes, Hume himself conveyed serious reservations to other Scots in private which he did not apparently share with Ferguson. Prior to the publication of the *Essay*, Hume’s correspondence with Hugh Blair reveals that Hume was not only unhappy with the draft he had read, but that he thought it should not be published without considerable alterations. A close reading of the exchange of correspondence between Ferguson and Hume suggests that Ferguson may well have become aware of Hume’s uncomplimentary comments to Blair about the *Essay*. In any event, Allan’s depiction of Hume’s reception raises some intriguing questions about the Ferguson-Hume relationship. As is well known, Hume assisted Ferguson in obtaining the Advocate’s Librarian position and included Ferguson in his will. But much less well known are Hume’s conflicted sentiments about Ferguson actually taking up the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, Ferguson’s sharp rebuke of Hume at a critical point in their correspondence, and Ferguson’s steadfast presence as a friend to Hume during the final weeks and days of the latter’s life. One takeaway is that the full story on the complex, tender and yet volatile relationship between the two has yet to be written.

In a larger sense, Allan’s exposition of Ferguson as a social theorist sheds light on the issue of why Ferguson’s star faded by the early twentieth century. Part of Ferguson’s legacy as a social theorist was that the *Essay* ‘formed the

prism through which he would gradually come to be seen by other leading intellectuals.' Allan then relates this prism to 'the formation of new ... political ideologies ... materialism and Marxism being much the most obvious.' As Ferguson scholars are well aware, to the extent that Ferguson began to be re-discovered in the late twentieth-century, he was, oddly, appropriated by both neo-Marxist sociologists (such as Ronald Meek) and by sympathizers of free market, capitalist social thought (such as Frederick Hayek). This turn of events could be viewed in terms of what might be called a *polarization of ideology* in the modern West that begins to materialize following the French Revolution and becomes calcified near the inception of the Cold War between the U.S. and its allies and the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence. Because Adam Smith's economic theory, rightly and wrongly, became the prism through which private capitalism was extolled by the U.S. axis of powers, Smith's legacy endured in the bi-polar ideological world. Similarly, because Karl Marx's political economy became the prism through which communism (really state capitalism) was extolled by the Soviet Union and its satellites, Marx's legacy continued apace.

With the subsequent symbolic end of the Cold War associated with the fall of the Berlin Wall, today's geo-political order is frequently characterized as a post-Cold War, multi-conflicted arena featuring the United States as the single dominant military superpower (though China is beginning to threaten them and Russia continues to agitate against their economic hegemony). However, a bi-polar *mentality* is still reflected in the increasingly polarized political rhetoric of 'right' (now 'alt-right') versus 'left' (now 'leftist'), 'conservative' versus 'liberal,' 'free market' versus 'socialist,' and, perhaps more subtly, 'libertarians' versus 'state-interventionists,' 'business' versus 'labor,' and 'entrepreneurs' versus 'community organizers.' There are two major problems with this type of rhetorical divide. First, it does not fit the complex, multi-dimensional character of the political landscape. Second, it obscures an underlying unity. Adherents of both right and left, or the heirs of both Smith and Marx, embrace a sacrosanct elevation of the commercial arts – whether in the form of private or state capitalism – as the queen of the arts. In the process, other arts, including the political, aesthetic, and what Ferguson referred to as the 'intellectual' arts, are made subservient to the expansion and growth of economic activities. As a result, Ferguson's legacy as a social theorist during the past two hundred years is undercut – if not virtually erased from cultural memory – because he so directly and adamantly critiqued the all too facile celebration of the unbridled march of economic production itself.

It is not of course being argued that Ferguson did not see many advantages to progress in the commercial sector. Quite the contrary. But he was always careful to qualify these advantages – perhaps especially in *Principles of Moral and Political Science* – in terms of the potential for things to go terribly wrong *if* entrepreneurs ever lost sight of the need to limit and constrain exertions driven by possessive self-interest within the boundaries of virtue and civic responsibility. It is in this regard that several aspects of Ferguson's larger intellectual project should be re-emphasized. These include his stress on the foundational agential character of human beings as ambitious, free artisans of their own humanity (who exert themselves in all the arts), dire warnings about preoccupations with economic factors as means of success and measures of self-worth, and charge to attend actively to the rights and sufferings of others by robustly engaging in civic life.

Allan contends that a key reason Ferguson's *Essay* was out of print for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was that 'its specific content and analysis, cast in outmoded and intensely polemical language of civic virtue and classical republicanism, seemed less relevant to contemporary concerns of the nineteenth century'. While this may well have been the case, two comments are in order. First, a major reason *why* such language may have seemed irrelevant could have to do with the onset of the ideological polarization described above. The language of civic virtue would become anathema to a culture which championed the potential for the unlimited accumulation of individual wealth. Likewise, the political model of classical republicanism – with its balancing of the freedoms and rights of various classes and factions – would become anachronistic to a culture enamored with the ideal of achieving a classless workers' paradise.

Second, existing accounts of both Ferguson's own notions of 'civic virtue' and of 'republicanism' need to be re-visited. To a certain extent, Ferguson's polemic was bursting the bounds of classical republican rhetoric. As Katherine Nicolai has argued, Ferguson's understanding of virtue was not simply synonymous with that of ancient Greco-Roman Stoics, let alone with Calvinist Christian social ethical teaching.<sup>28</sup> It also included elements of the good life found in both modern western cultures and in the cultures of indigenous peoples, including Scottish Highlanders. In a somewhat analogous fashion, Iain McDaniel has suggested that Ferguson's understanding of the proper organization of political power was broader than both the egalitarian

<sup>28</sup> Katherine Nicolai, 'Adam Ferguson's Pedagogy and His Engagement with Stoicism,' *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 12.2 (2014): 199–212.

republicanism of the ancients and the anti-monarchical republicanism of American and French revolutionaries.<sup>29</sup> For Ferguson, an enduring Republic was always a tenuous, dynamic, conflictual arena in which competing social and economic classes affirmed various divergent interests and rights, but one in which great inequality in wealth and inordinate territorial ambitions were checked, while overtures toward so-called democratic rule by popular majorities were actively challenged and structured in fierce, but reasoned, debate. Classical republicanism *sans* acute ethical self-restraint regarding the individual's propensity for economic self-aggrandizement, and the ruler's penchant for ever more extensions of sovereignty is simply unworkable in the long run.

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In conclusion, each of the following chapters provides a unique perspective on, and re-conceptualization of, Ferguson's intellectual legacy. Individually and collectively, they call further attention to the need for a re-appropriation of Ferguson's vocabulary of moral duty and active citizenship – what we have termed Ferguson's 'moral imperium' – for the preservation of human flourishing and political freedom. Ferguson would have approved. Now the burden rests on others of us to re-imagine Ferguson's vocabulary of 'exertion' and of 'artisan' for the preservation of individual and corporate virtue in the larger geo-political capitalist order. I hope that this book – which is a mosaic of specific insights regarding how Ferguson viewed the dividing issues of his time – will constitute a springboard for such deep level inquiry. At the very least, perhaps it will bring some sense of proportion to Ferguson's literary achievement by placing due emphasis on all the forms and phases of his literary activity. The reader is in for a real treat.

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<sup>29</sup> See Iain McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

# Politics in the Classroom: Ferguson as a Professor in the Age of Revolution

Michael Brown

Adam Ferguson had an unusually long, varied, and colourful career. In his early twenties, Ferguson became military chaplain in the Black Watch – where he was rumoured to have seen action at the battle of Fontenoy in 1745 (he did not, but he was present at an operation at Port l’Orient in September 1746 and in the retreat from Flanders that year).<sup>1</sup> Throughout his career he mentored the sons of nobility. Examples include his service as a tutor to sons of the Earl of Bute and as a guide for Charles Earl of Chesterfield on a European grand tour (during which he met with Voltaire). While moving from his military chaplaincy to a future academic career in Edinburgh, Ferguson spent a year as the Keeper of the Advocates Library (succeeding David Hume). Shortly thereafter he took up an appointment as a professor of natural philosophy at the University of Edinburgh (1759–1764), occupied the Chair of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy (1764–1785), and was nominally a professor of mathematics following his retirement from active teaching in 1785.<sup>2</sup> He was also actively engaged in civic affairs. He was secretary to the Carlisle commission, which tried and failed to negotiate a settlement of the American conflict in 1778 after the defeat at Saratoga, and he may have served for a time as Lord Milton’s private secretary.<sup>3</sup> Military man, private tutor, librarian, professor, and politician, it is little wonder he sought to reconcile the

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<sup>1</sup> For details of Ferguson’s military experience see Bruce Buchan, ‘Adam Ferguson, the 43<sup>rd</sup> and the Fictions of Fontenoy’ in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 25–43.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Brown, ‘Dugald Stewart and the Problem of Teaching Politics in the 1790s’, *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 1.1 (2007), 87–126. Ferguson’s tenure as Chair of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy was clearly his most significant professional academic achievement. Dugald Stewart succeeded him as the moral philosophy chair.

<sup>3</sup> J.B.Fagg, ‘An Ingenious Literary Production’: Adam Ferguson and the Carlisle Commission Manifesto’, *Scotia*, 24 (2000), 1–14.

varied passions of mankind in a holistic system. In so doing he emphasised the need to maintain the virtues of both ‘rude’ and ‘refined’ nations.<sup>4</sup>

In *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), Ferguson is particularly concerned with explicating the nature of these virtues. Mapping out the stadial development of human society, he narrates his story using a series of key devices. Most frequently deployed in Marxist readings of the *Essay* is the sequential development of the means of production: moving from tribes of hunter-gatherers through agrarian communities to complex commercial societies.<sup>5</sup> There is also a second reading or background story, which has received attention in the Cambridge School’s treatment of the Scottish Enlightenment—with its own concern for formal political structures and jurisprudence. This measures an incline from savage peoples (who have no idea of property) to barbarous communities (who do have an idea of personal property but have not yet developed a legal system to organise its management), and subsequently to polished nations whose legal systems are fully operational.<sup>6</sup>

Ferguson’s *Essay* is imbued with an abiding concern that in the transition from one form of social organisation to another some of the primary passions of humanity are stunted, to the ultimate detriment of the emergent society. The final section of the *Essay* indeed, can be read as a Jeremiad against the corruption and effeminacy of commercial society, expressing the fear that the dissolution of the society will follow.<sup>7</sup> The problem raised there was whether it was possible to bridge the conceptual divide between rude (savage and barbarous) societies and polite nations. How might the virtues found in the former be sustained in the latter? This is the conundrum upon which this paper turns, and in doing so, it raises (and hopefully answers) questions concerning

<sup>4</sup> Detail from this paragraph comes from the ‘Chronology of Ferguson’s Life’ in Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xxvi–xxviii. Ferguson employed the terms ‘rude’ and ‘refined’ to refer to the two major forms of social organization that become manifest in the history of civil society in his famous *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. The category ‘rude’ refers to groups of people who were then commonly labelled as ‘savage’ or ‘barbarian,’ while the term ‘refined’ pertained to groups of people in polite, genteel, relatively modern societies.

<sup>5</sup> R.L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 150–5.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Jack Hill for highlighting the importance of this narrative: see Jack A. Hill, ‘Adam Ferguson’s Discourse on “Rude Nations” in the *Essay* and the Critique of Despotism’, *Scottish Journal of Historical Studies*, 38/1 (May 2018), 104–20. See also Ferguson, *Essay*, 82.

<sup>7</sup> For a wider discussion of the structure of the *Essay* see Christopher Finlay, ‘Rhetoric and Citizenship in Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society*’, *History of Political Thought*, 27 (2006), 27–49.

Ferguson's commitment to the classroom and, by default, his perception of contemporary political events and the challenges they contained.

### Valour

Scholarship has rightly attended to the role of military valour in Ferguson's answer to the problem of retaining virtue. In the *Essay* Ferguson identifies as the first of his 'general characteristics of human nature' the trait of 'self-preservation.' This, he further observes, operates 'prior to the perception of pleasure and pain, and prior to the experience of what is pernicious and useful.'<sup>8</sup> The dispositions toward self-preservation, Ferguson contends, are 'nearly the same in man that they are in the other animals,' however, he adds that in human development:

They are sooner or later combined with reflection and foresight; they give rise to his apprehension on the subject of property, and make him acquainted with that object of care which he calls his interest. Without the instincts which teach the beaver and the squirrel, the ant and the bee, to make up their little hoards for winter, at first improvident, and, where no immediate object of passion is near, addicted to sloth, he [the human] becomes, in process of time, the great storemaster among animals.<sup>9</sup>

Property and acquisition, the twin engines of progress, are derived from a pre-rational instinct to survive. Moreover, the survival impulse underpins two subsidiary characteristics Ferguson observes in humankind: the tendency to congregate in groups and for those groups to compete with each other. As Lisa Hill has highlighted, conflict is built into Ferguson's anthropology.<sup>10</sup>

The propensity of human groups to come into conflict with each other prioritises the natural attribute of physical prowess and the concomitant mental attribute of courage. It also underscores the need for military organisation.<sup>11</sup> It is here that Ferguson's biography becomes pertinent: his involvement in the Black Watch and his experience of battle; his mobilisation of the Poker Club in

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Hill, 'Eighteenth-Century Anticipations of a Sociology of Conflict', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62 (2001), 281–99. *Idem*, *The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Dordrecht: Springer Press, 2006), 123–38.

<sup>11</sup> It is the perception of the need for military organization that prompts Ferguson's favouring of Sparta over Athens in the *Essay*. See Alexander Broadie, 'Adam Ferguson on Sparta, Rome and the Fragility of Civil Liberties', in this volume.

1762 to campaign for the extension of a militia into Scotland and the pamphlet five years earlier arguing in favour of a select, voluntary militia in England all fall under the command of the militaristic composition of his thought.<sup>12</sup> It is in his arguments for a Scottish militia force that Ferguson most clearly enunciated the equation he constructed between military valour and civic virtue.<sup>13</sup> Asserting that ‘We do not propose to give up our liberties; we propose to gain a situation where we may better defend them,’ he laid out a series of measures to heighten the merit attached in Britain to serving in the militia. Ferguson hoped that ‘from such a distribution of honours it may be expected that the military character will rise in the esteem of the public, and the arms of the nation settle in the hands of those who deserve its confidence, on account of their personal spirit, the property and interest in its preservation.’<sup>14</sup> Among the numerous benefits his militia scheme would incur would be the ability of the elite – he speaks of a ‘select band’ in counterpoise of a ‘promiscuous multitude’ – to make a personal investment in the country, and a reduction in the likelihood of faction.<sup>15</sup> In a passage redolent of the wider Scottish literati’s memory of the fall of Edinburgh to the Jacobite forces in 1745, he argued:

Whilst the body of our people is disarmed, and pacific to a degree which tempts an invasion, we have reason to apprehend danger even from a few, whom the spirit of faction continues to stimulate. A few banditti from the mountains, trained by their situation to a warlike disposition might overrun the country . . . When the lovers of freedom and their country have an equal use of arms, the cause of a pretender to the dominion and property of this island is from that moment desperate.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast he closed by expressing his confidence that ‘if we rest our militia upon its proper basis, a general use of arms and the love of honour, we shall

<sup>12</sup> On the Poker club see R.B.Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 231–7.

<sup>13</sup> For treatment of this text and its wider context see John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh: John Donald Press, 1985) and R. B. Sher, ‘Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and the Problem of National Defense’, *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (1989), 240–68.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (London, 1756), 30, 41.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, 47. See also David Raynor, ‘Ferguson’s *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia*’ in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), 70.

<sup>16</sup> Ferguson, *Reflections Previous*, 24–5. See Sher, *Church and University*, 37–44 for a treatment of the effect of the 1745 Rising on the Moderate party literati.

find men hardy enough to serve their country; that duty will employ the most deserving of our people, whose sword, without alarming the public liberty, will be a sure defence against a foreign enemy.<sup>17</sup> Honour, duty, liberty and defence: the militia was Ferguson's venue for valour and virtue.<sup>18</sup>

## Senates

However important this trope of military valour is to Ferguson, it was from the early pages of the *Essay* entwined with a second register which has received rather less scholarly attention. As well as asserting the existence of a 'set of dispositions' that prompt self-preservation, the same sentence acknowledges 'another which lead to society'. While these principles of 'union' can, 'by enlisting him [the natural man] on the side of one tribe or community, frequently engage him in war and contention with the rest of mankind' they also manifest themselves in affection and in social concord.<sup>19</sup> The social union is not founded on self-interest, but emanates from 'mutual discoveries of generosity, joint trials of fortitude [which] redouble the ardours of friendship, and kindle a flame in the human breast, which the considerations of personal interest and safety cannot suppress.'<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Ferguson asserts that 'men are so far from valuing society on account of its mere external conveniences that they are commonly most attached where those conveniences are least frequent; and are there most faithful where the tribute of their allegiance is paid in blood.'<sup>21</sup> From hence Ferguson derives the spirit of patriotism, which alone 'can account for the obstinate attachment of a savage to his unsettled and defenceless tribe.'<sup>22</sup> The moralist in Ferguson contends that it is, in fact, in commercial society that man 'may be supposed to have experienced, in its full extent, the interests which

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<sup>17</sup> Ferguson, *Reflections Previous*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> In this I concur with R. B. Sher who argued the militia was, for Ferguson, 'first and foremost a school for virtue'. Sher, *Church and University*, 219. See however David Raynor who writes 'I can find no basis in *Reflections* for such an interpretation, and believe it would be more accurate to say that for Ferguson the militia was first and foremost a formidable and potentially invincible system of national defence, but to be so it had to be restricted to those who were *already* virtuous. The lower orders of society are not virtuous and can never become virtuous, so must be excluded from the militia.' Raynor, 'Ferguson's *Reflections*', 71.

<sup>19</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

individuals have in the preservation of their country.<sup>23</sup> And yet Ferguson adds a cautionary observation regarding social interaction in commercial society:

It is here indeed, if ever, that man is sometimes found a detached and solitary being; he has found an object which sets him in competition with his fellow-creatures, and he deals with them as he does with his cattle and his soil, for the sake of the profits they bring. The mighty engine which we suppose to have formed society, only tends to set its members at variance, or to continue their intercourse after the bands of affection are broken.<sup>24</sup>

Commerce, when coupled with political vices, is seen as corrupting; alienating the individual from his peers through the pursuit of material self-interest.<sup>25</sup> This creates difficulty for how one should account for states coming to identify general interests, and how they experience what Ferguson terms 'National Felicity'.<sup>26</sup> It leads him, openly following Montesquieu, to divide states into types and to pronounce on their varied motivations. Three basic modes exist: despotism, monarchies, and republics, the last of these being themselves divided into aristocracies and democracies. Monarchies are energised by a pursuit of honour, which comes by way of recognition from the crown. In contrast, citizens of democracies 'must love equality; they must respect the rights of their fellow-citizens; they must unite by common ties of affection to the state'.<sup>27</sup> Aristocracies appear in large part to follow the same deliberative system as democracies, for 'the most perfect equality of rights can never exclude the ascent of superior minds, nor the assemblies of a collective body govern without the direction of select councils'.<sup>28</sup> Yet aristocracy inhibits the choice of office holder by insisting that social privilege trumps meritocracy, ensuring that the government relies on an elegant facade. In a passage with a resonance for his later reflections on revolution (to which we are yet to turn) he writes of how

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> 'His chapter on 'luxury' was no blanket condemnation; he allowed that as well as being censured, luxury has been praised as a means of adding 'national lustre and felicity'. What this chapter's balance-sheet approach reveals is an awareness on Ferguson's part that the meaning of 'luxury' has become too fluid.' Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 141.

<sup>26</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 68.

The elevation of one class is moderated arrogance, the submission of the other a limited deference. The first must be careful, by concealing the invidious part of their distinction, to palliate what is grievous in the public arrangement, and by their education, their cultivated manners and improved talents to appear qualified for the stations they occupy. The other must be taught to yield, from respect and personal attachment, what could not otherwise be extorted by force. When this moderation fails on either side the constitution totters.<sup>29</sup>

This suggests, that senates gain their legitimacy from the extensive nature of their deliberative scope. Ferguson shares a common eighteenth-century anxiety about the influence of factionalism upon national politics: a fear of the cabal, the double cabinet (Edmund Burke's bitter term). In monarchies, he alleges 'the name of senate is unknown' even when 'every individual, in his separate capacity in some measure, deliberates for his country'.<sup>30</sup> The separation spoken of here is what disables monarchy from effectively identifying the common good, even as it enables the efficient enactment of executive authority.

Senatorial deliberation, and its capacity to identify the common good, is vital to the manifestation of the principles of union. Only through wise and broad counsel can the state fend off factionalism and the dangers of self-interest. Again the biography is of relevance here. The Carlisle Commission was motivated by the pursuit of a general good between warring factions, Britain and America. Ferguson may have deemed it a senatorial duty to accept the invitation to join the commission, even as he swithered between advocating a military solution and one based on the establishment of an American senate. Even in his most belligerent formulation, in a letter to John Macpherson dated 15 January 1778, when he mooted a campaign 'to have the exclusive possession of the Hudsons River and the Lakes' thereby destroying colonial resistance, he moderated the tone by reflecting 'Lord have mercy on those who expect any good in this business without sufficient instruments of terror in one hand and of moderation and justice in the other.' He further deflated his view by concluding 'so much for the opinion of us here who govern the world at our own firesides'.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 68–9.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 70, 70–1.

<sup>31</sup> Ferguson to [John Macpherson], Edinburgh, 15 January 1778 in Vincenzo Merolle (ed.), *The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson* (2 vols; London: William Pickering, 1995), I: 162.

Thus, alongside the valour that combats external threats and expresses patriotic virtue, Ferguson lauds a second form of courage, that of intellectual fearlessness: the ability to speak capaciously about the general good without fear of consequence from vested, parochial if powerful interests within the state. In a lengthy but important passage which concerns the origins of the senate as a form of government, Ferguson observed:

In these happy, though informal proceedings, where age alone gives a place in the council; where youth, ardour and valour in the field, give a title to the station of leader; where the whole community is assembled on any alarming occasion, we may venture to say that we have found the origin of the senate, the executive power and the assembly of the people; institutions for which ancient legislators have been so much renowned. The senate among the Greeks as well as the Latins, appears from the etymology of its name, to have been originally composed of elderly men. The military leader at Rome, in a manner not unlike to that of the American warrior, proclaimed his levies, and the citizen prepared for the field in consequence of a voluntary engagement. The suggestions of nature, which directed the policy of nations in the wilds of America, were followed before on the banks of the Euetas and the Tyber; and Lycurgas and Romulus found the model of their institutions where the members of every rude nation find the earliest mode of uniting their talents and combining their forces.<sup>32</sup>

Conrad Brunström has drawn attention to this passage, writing of how Ferguson imagined a ‘native North American male . . . characterized by an independence that makes him fit for both the battlefield and the general assembly. One does not’, Brunström continues, ‘discard the occupation of a hunter in favour of the occupation of a senator although one’s senatorial strengths are likely to be cultivated in proportion to one’s physical decay.’<sup>33</sup>

This conceit is developed further in an unpublished essay entitled ‘Of Statesmen and Warriors’. While much of the focus of this work is on the position of the warrior in society, Ferguson contends that ‘the function of war may have been for youth that of the state for mature age’ while also acknowledging how ‘in families of rank the quick are destined for parliament

<sup>32</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 84–5.

<sup>33</sup> Conrad Brunström, *Thomas Sheridan’s Career and Influence: An Actor in Earnest* (Lanham, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 71.

[while] the slow will make do for the army'.<sup>34</sup> While worried that this 'choice is prejudicial to the military department' he accepted that 'Writing and speaking are the qualities of statesmen. The forms of parade and review those of the warrior. An officer who has been drilled and drilling all his life is a reputed master of his trade. A tongue in debate and hand for the pen in office is a man of business in the state.'<sup>35</sup> As such, 'when the principal honours of the state are as in Great Britain made the prize of civil or political merits, genius is directed chiefly into this channel and men come into publick view with the single talent of speech-making as sufficient to ensure their fortunes.'<sup>36</sup> While Ferguson is critical in this respect of the separation of the roles of statesman and warrior in contemporary society, this passage highlights the centrality of the spoken word in his thinking about statecraft and civil virtue. In a rude world, in which roles are not delimited, the aging process slowly shifts the kind of contribution that can be made to the community. If the militia is a young man's game, Ferguson seems to be suggesting, physical deterioration is compensated for by an increase in wisdom: the senate is necessarily 'composed of elderly men'.

### Oratory

The ability to flourish in an assembly relies not on physical prowess but on oratorical ability. The senator or parliamentarian can only influence proceedings by force of argument, by eloquence, by the passion of his interventions and the reasonableness of his argumentation. As a consequence, many eighteenth-century commentators assumed a correlation between the health of political oratory and that of the body politic. Freedom of speech was commensurate with political liberty. Thomas Sheridan, whose *Lectures on Elocution* (1762) derived from a fashionably attended series of talks in Edinburgh exemplified such a presumption, as did both Adam Smith and Hugh Blair when they lectured on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in Glasgow and in the Scottish capital respectively. One focus of the debate that ranged around James Macpherson's Ossian sequence was the credibility apparently oral poetic traditions might enjoy when there was an inability to answer Samuel Johnson's loaded demand for the originals.

Just as Johnson evinced scepticism about Ossian's authenticity, so David Hume was, predictably, one of the few voices to question the neat equation

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<sup>34</sup> Adam Ferguson, 'Of Statesmen and Warriors' in Vincenzo Merolle (ed.) *The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson* (London: Pickering, 2006), 40.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 40, 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

between oratory and liberty. His essay, 'Of Civil Liberty' was intentionally disruptive, stating only to undermine the common assumption:

It had been observed by the ancients, that all the arts and sciences arose among free nations . . . It had also been observed, that, when the GREEKS lost their liberty, though they increased mightily in riches, by means of the conquests of ALEXANDER; yet the arts, from that moment, declined among them, and have never since been able to raise their head in that climate. Learning was transplanted to ROME, the only free nation at that time in the universe; and having met with so favourable a soil, it made prodigious shoots for above a century; till the decay of liberty produced also the decay of letters, and spread a total barbarism over the world . . . But what would these writers have said, to the instances of modern ROME and of FLORENCE? Of which the former carried to perfection all the finer arts of sculpture, painting, and music, as well as poetry, though it groaned under tyranny, and under the tyranny of priests.<sup>37</sup>

This dissonance reverberated into a rueful observation of current cultural energies:

The most eminent instance of the flourishing of learning in absolute governments, is that of France, which scarcely ever enjoyed any established liberty, and yet has carried the arts and sciences as near perfection as any other nation . . . The elegance and propriety of style have been very much neglected among us. We have no dictionary of our language, and scarcely a tolerable grammar. The first polite prose we have, was writ by a man who is still alive . . . Men, in this country, have been so much occupied in the great disputes of Religion, Politics, and Philosophy, that they had no relish for the seemingly minute observations of grammar and criticism.<sup>38</sup>

This difference of opinion between Hume and Ferguson about using oratory as a political indicator may help account for Hume's muted response to the

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<sup>37</sup> David Hume, 'Of Civil Liberty' in idem, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, Eugene F. Miller (ed.) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 89–90.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–2.

*Essay on the History of Civil Society*, despite his praise for an earlier 'Essay on Refinement'.<sup>39</sup>

Hume's doubt did not dissuade his friend Ferguson. In line with stock eighteenth-century argument, Ferguson declared in *An Essay* that 'Sentiment and fancy, the use of the hand or the head, are not inventions of particular men; and the flourishing of the arts that depend on them are, in the case of any people, a proof rather of political felicity at home, than of any instruction received from abroad, or of any natural superiority in point of industry or talents.'<sup>40</sup> Ferguson then chose to track the 'History of Literature' from its natural basis in poetry towards the abstract thinking of history writing such as that conducted by Hume and, later, by Ferguson himself.

Ferguson conjectured that the origins of literature lay with 'poets or orators' for, 'occasioned, probably by the physical connection we have mentioned between the emotions of a heated imagination, and the impressions received by music and pathetic sounds, every tale among rude nations is repeated in verse, and is made to take the form of a song.'<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in a proto-Romantic idealisation he proposed that the poet 'delivers the emotions of the heart, in words suggested by the heart, for he knows no other'.<sup>42</sup> And this capacity to transmit emotions was supplemented by the need to recall the event in an act of memory: 'not having the advantage of writing', he accepted, 'they are obliged to bring the ear in the aid of memory, in order to facilitate the repetition and insure the preservation of their works.'<sup>43</sup>

Having postulated a natural inclination to oral communication, Ferguson elucidated a conjectural history of communication. While 'every tribe of barbarians have their passionate or historic rhymes, which contain the superstition, the enthusiasm, and the admiration of glory' and 'when we attend to the language that savages employ on any solemn occasion, it appears that man is a poet by nature'.<sup>44</sup> It was only in advanced commercial society, which has developed writing, that abstract discourses of law and history emerge. However, in line with his thinking on the integration of commercial and military activity and his opposition to the division of labour, Ferguson was at pains to

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<sup>39</sup> See also David Raynor, 'Why did David Hume Dislike Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*?' and Vincenzo Merolle, 'Hume as Critic of Ferguson's *Essay*' both in Heath and Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy*, 45–72, 73–87.

<sup>40</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 163.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

insist that the development of artistic skill was not contradicted by the demands of mercantile or political life. Rather,

Although business is sometimes a rival to study, retirement and leisure are not the principal requisites to the improvement, perhaps or even to the exercise of literary talents. The most striking exertions of imagination and sentiment have a reference to mankind: they are excited by the presence and intercourse of men: they have the most vigour when actuated in the mind by the operation of its principal springs, by the emulations, the friendships and the oppositions which subsist among a forward and aspiring people.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, he concluded his remarks by reflecting on how, 'In whatever manner men are formed for the great efforts of elocution or conduct, it appears the most glaring of all other deceptions to look for the accomplishments of a human character in the mere attainments of speculation, whilst we neglect the qualities of fortitude and public affection, which are so necessary to render our knowledge an article of happiness or use.'<sup>46</sup> In line with such thinking, Ferguson's broad career can be understood to exist on what Brunström has described in relation to the elocutionist, actor, and theatre manager Thomas Sheridan as 'a continuum of concern linking the stage, the senate and the pulpit'.<sup>47</sup>

In the case of the stage, Ferguson was involved in the staging of the controversial production of John Home's *Douglas* (1756), which resulted in a pamphlet war and church proceedings against the ministerial author. Ferguson entered the lists in favour of his friend, arguing that 'if Plays are a poison, it is at least but slow in its operations.'<sup>48</sup> Rather he proposed if one availed of the morality of the stage as a barometer of social mores the indicators were optimistic for:

The stage has subsisted in Britain about two hundred years ... a certain degree of indecency and licentiousness once permitted is now rejected, and that plays more pure, and of a better moral tendency are either chosen

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>47</sup> Brunström, *Thomas Sheridan's Career*, 84.

<sup>48</sup> Adam Ferguson, *The Morality of Stage-Plays Seriously Considered* (Edinburgh, 1757), 3.

from our ancient stock, or that these qualities are at least expected from every writer of the present age.<sup>49</sup>

Theatre was a vital repository for a functioning society, being ‘founded on the best principles of human nature, the love of virtue and compassion to the distressed: for who would ever go to a tragedy if he had not a heart formed to pity and a mind susceptible of the admiration due to worthy characters.’<sup>50</sup> Ferguson recognised the possibility of corruption inherent in immoral performances, but in a passage redolent with the power of oratory he pronounced:

We know that the language of the theatre, or any other language whatever, may be employed either to recommend virtue or to insinuate folly and licentiousness. If licentious people alone frequent this entertainment they will perhaps encourage what they like to hear. But persons of sobriety, and regard to virtue, would make that entertainment form itself to a very different strain, and give the whole a very different influence on the manners of mankind.<sup>51</sup>

As for the senate, we can read both the pamphlet denouncing Richard Price (for using licentious political language amongst other charges) and the (co-) authored *Manifesto and Proclamation to the Members of Congress* (1778) as examples of the deliberative function of political oratory.<sup>52</sup> For instance, here is an extract from that second text which, while Yasuo Amoh calls it ‘an ultimatum issued to the American rebels by the Carlisle Commission’, presents their proposals as calm and reasoned.<sup>53</sup> It models an address to both the legislators and the wider political community, hoping to divide ‘the Americans into separate camps by offering a separate peace to each area’.<sup>54</sup>

Having amply and repeatedly made known to the Congress, and also having proclaimed to the inhabitants of North America in general, the benevolent overtures of Great Britain towards a reunion and collation with her colonies, we do not think it consistent either with the duty we owe

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 2–3.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 21–2.

<sup>52</sup> ‘It would seem Ferguson himself was singled out as the author.’ Buchan, ‘Adam Ferguson, the 43<sup>rd</sup> and the Fictions of Fontenoy’, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Yasuo Amoh, ‘Ferguson’s Views on the American and French Revolutions’ in Heath and Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: History*, 79.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 79.

to our country, or with a just regard to the characters we bear, to persist in holding out offers which in our estimation required only to be known to be most gratefully accepted . . . To the members of the Congress then, we again declare that we are ready to concur in all satisfactory and just arrangements for securing to them and their respective constituents, the re-establishment of peace, with the exemption from any imposition of taxes by the Parliament of Great-Britain, and the irrevocable enjoyment of every privilege consistent with that union of interests and force on which our mutual prosperity and the safety of our common religion and liberties depend.<sup>55</sup>

Yet the *Manifesto* also 'seemed to threaten the imposition of severe military penalties on the Americans' and prompted a parliamentary debate in Britain which concluded with the formal censure of the document by the House of Lords. The Commission itself ended in farcical failure, 'as the Americans refused to recognise the Commission because the Commissioners refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Continental Congress.'<sup>56</sup>

With regard to the pulpit, a sermon Ferguson preached in Ersh to the Black Watch can be read through a lens not just of patriotic military valour, but also of the rousing power of religious oratory. Alongside a plea to recognise the political benefits of continued loyalty to the Hanoverian cause in the face of the Jacobite rising of 1745–6, Ferguson was not averse to making the conflict a decidedly religious war. He exhorted the troops 'remember, you are men sworn to defend your country: Take courage and play the men for your people and for the cities of your God.'<sup>57</sup> He positioned the Jacobites as purveyors of secular and religious tyranny while admiring a constitution in which 'our worship is not clogged with superstitious ceremonies, calculated to strike the simple with awe, or raise the power of a few designing men. We have no whimsical doctrines for which there is no foundation in scripture'.<sup>58</sup> Connecting Protestantism with liberty he avowed: 'Every man may openly profess his own sentiments, unless manifestly subversive of the state, without any apprehensions of the rack or gibbet.'<sup>59</sup> He concluded by asking the troops to

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<sup>55</sup> C. Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War* (2 vols., London, 1794), II: 58–9.

<sup>56</sup> Buchan, 'Adam Ferguson, the 43<sup>rd</sup> and the Fictions of Fontenoy', 40

<sup>57</sup> Adam Ferguson, *A Sermon Preached in the Ersh Language* (London, 1746), 22. Citing 2 Samuel 10.12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

'humble ourselves before God, pray that he would forgive our sins, that he would continue the light of the gospel amongst us, and strengthen our hands in the defence of our holy religion and happy privileges.'<sup>60</sup> Here Ferguson deploys oratory in defence of orthodoxy.

Taken together, Ferguson's prose evidences a concern for the location and purpose of oratory. The stage provides refraction on speech's capacity to create a community from an audience, the senate a citizenry from a populace, and the pulpit a congregation from a people. The social, political and ethical instrumentality of speech is embedded in Ferguson's oeuvre.

### Language

The origin of language receives its most extended treatment by Ferguson in the *Principles of Moral Political Science* (1792). He began by assuming that the exertion of speaking was the result of a natural human ability, suggesting that 'Everyone is disposed to communicate what he thinks, and to receive communication of what is thought by others.'<sup>61</sup> However, this communicative capacity could be subdivided into its constituent parts. Mirroring the narrative he offered of the changes to the means of production and to jurisprudence, he offered a three-stage history of communication, from mute signs, to speech and into written characters.<sup>62</sup> Of the first he assumed them to be 'fixed by nature, employed spontaneously, and understood or interpreted, by virtue of an original faculty, corresponding to the instinct which leads to the use of it and equally prior to any experience or instruction of any sort.'<sup>63</sup> These natural communicative signs included 'the smile and the frown' which Ferguson described as 'untaught and unpremeditated expressions of pleasure and displeasure. They are understood by the infant at the breast, and returned by him, before he has any knowledge of the organs or features on which they are traced.'<sup>64</sup> In line with then-prevalent theories of sensibility, Ferguson accepted that 'to the latest hour of human life, every passion, and every affection, give outwards signs of their existence, and often betray a state of mind, which the party concerned would wish to conceal.'<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>61</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (2 vols, Edinburgh and London: A Strahan, T Cadell and W Creech, 1792), I: 37.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., I: 39. See also Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: A Kincaid and J. Bell, 1769), 46 for these categories.

<sup>63</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 38.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. On sensibility theory, see Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986); G.J. Barker Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century*

This original, instinctive desire to communicate through ‘mute signs’ was largely shared by animals. However, humans indicated one aspect of their distinctive nature by having more complex, arbitrary, if shared sounds to refer to objects, ideas and emotions: ‘We are apt to treat’ he wrote

the origin of language as we treat that of society itself, by supposing a time when neither existed; but from the facts now stated, we may venture to infer, that since mankind were fairly entered on this scene of human life there never was any such time; that both associating and speaking, in however rude a form, are coeval with the species of man.<sup>66</sup>

However, he observed that ‘language in its rudest state, furnished some means of expression, instinctive or casual: In its most accomplished state, the stock of expression is greatly enlarged’, so much so that,

In the use of this wonderful expedient, man is enabled to name every subject in nature and to mark its relations; or by mere inflections of sound to express the modulations of thought, sentiment and will to a degree of subtlety or nice discrimination, in numberless parts, which it becomes difficult for the grammarian, or the metaphysician, to arrange under the titles to which they belong.<sup>67</sup>

Unlike the first two modes of communication, writing was unique in that it was ‘not universal’ in its usage, coming instead from a small number of highly developed societies. These in turn spread the skill to other communities. In this way, for instance, Europe shared a source for its manifold languages. In turn, written language was divisible between simple signifiers, in which ‘the written character is the sign of the word,’ and more abstract systems, where ‘the written character is not the sign of a subject, or of its name, but the mark of a simple sound ... such as we term verbs and consonants, in the construction of an alphabet.’<sup>68</sup> While the first form was ‘the more obvious invention’ the second had the advantage of being infinitely flexible, and ‘though setting out at a point more remote from its end, is in fact more easily learned and more effectual to its purpose.’ Although not developed in the *Principles*, Ferguson described this purpose succinctly in the *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1769): ‘Writing preserves

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*Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>66</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 43.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 39–40.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 46.

the memory of past transactions, of observation and experience. It preserves literary productions, and tends to improve and to extend the use of speech.'<sup>69</sup>

Ferguson expressed a high level of optimism about the progressive nature of language, arguing 'communication extends from nation to nation, and from age to age, at any indefinite distance of place or time; and the society, or co-operations of men may be conceived as extended accordingly. The present age is perfecting what a former age began; or is now beginning what a future age is to perfect.'<sup>70</sup> However this cheerful view was coupled with a stated concern for the fate of particular languages, for he also acknowledged that 'Living languages, if they do not improve, are disposed to decline, and not secured for change, even by the written monuments.'<sup>71</sup> The problem of linguistic decay, through misuse, was to find particular expression when Ferguson turned from generalising theories to occasional polemics.

### Revolutions

Ferguson lived through both the American and French Revolutions, and made observations on both.<sup>72</sup> As Yasuo Amoh has summarised, 'It was Ferguson's conviction that the British Empire should neither be dissolved by the American Colonists, nor defeated by France. Ferguson's strategies were however different. The British army had to defeat the American rebels. By contrast, he thought Britain should not make war against the French Army in the throes of Revolution.'<sup>73</sup> As this suggests Ferguson was politically cautious, and disinclined to share the enthusiasm of many Whigs for the changes underway in Britain's colonies or in the country's nearest neighbour. In the first case, he treated the Colonists as protagonists in a British civil war, permitting the suspension of the norms of military conduct. As Amoh notes, 'to support the authority of Britain by any means was Ferguson's consistent stance during the Revolutionary war' with America.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, as Michael Kugler has aptly observed of 'Ferguson's growing disenchantment in the later 1790s with a republican France ... [it] simultaneously reminded him of his beloved Roman Republic but threatened Britain in a terrible drawn out war' in which 'modern

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<sup>69</sup> *Ferguson, Institutes*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> *Ferguson, Principles*, I: 47.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 45.

<sup>72</sup> For a careful assessment of his political position see Hill, *The Passionate Society*, 215–31.

<sup>73</sup> Amoh, 'Ferguson's Views on the American and French Revolutions', 86.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

and commercial Britain seemed destined to play out the role of Carthage to France's Rome.<sup>75</sup>

Taking the universal view, Ferguson remarked in the *Principles* that 'Opinions on the subject of public, no less than private good are of much importance to mankind. As error and mistake, relating to the one, involve the mind in folly, suffering and disappointment; so in relation to the other, they would involve whole nations in disorder, riot or scenes of degradation and oppression.'<sup>76</sup> More particularly, in both the American and the French cases, he partially traced those initial mistakes back to a problem with oratory; namely, the influence of flawed or fraudulent political analysis conveyed by deceitful or deluded political speech.<sup>77</sup>

Thus at the close of his pamphlet attacking Richard Price, which is largely concerned with an intricate discussion of the concept of liberty as confined within a regular and legitimate legal system, he accosts his antagonist for 'the language of independence which he has taught the Americans'.<sup>78</sup> Price was guilty of 'endeavour[ing] to flatter the Americans' both in relation to domestic support for the war in Britain and 'on the subject of their strength'.<sup>79</sup> The prospect for America was less tranquil than Price proposed for 'what title have they to hope for an exemption from the too common fate of mankind; the fate that has ever attended democracies attempted on too large a scale; that of plunging at once into military government?'<sup>80</sup> Price's flattery was intended to deceive, the burden of his fault being the intentional misdirection of his American audience in order that they might 'mistake independence and separation of commonwealth for liberty'.<sup>81</sup> Political language was being misused to promulgate sedition and warfare.

Similarly in an unpublished essay written in or after 1806 which encapsulated his thoughts on the French Revolution, Ferguson assailed the 'partizans

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<sup>75</sup> Michael Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland' in Heath and Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy*, 141.

<sup>76</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 408.

<sup>77</sup> David Kettler has fruitfully offered the proposition that 'Ferguson's involvement in American affairs contributed to a political education that envisioned the possibility of encapsulating or hiving off the despotic elements inherent in imperial ventures and that taught the necessity of bargaining with even the most disorienting effects of revolution.' David Kettler, 'Political Education for Empire and Revolution' in Heath and Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: History*, 88.

<sup>78</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Remarks on a Pamphlet Lately Published by Dr Price* (London: T. Cadell, 1776), 59.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 54, 55.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

of bounaparte' for precisely the same misinterpretation of the term liberty, asserting that they 'say he has given peace to the continent of Europe. What peace subjugation!'<sup>82</sup> He proceeds, 'What a triumph for France may not some vainglorious Frenchman say?' only to reply: 'Such a triumph as the reduction and spoil of distant provinces were to Italy; the means of pampering, corrupting and alluring its rulers to every enormity of profligacy, cruelty and vice most oppressive, tremendous and ruinous to those who were nearest at hand and most immediately subject to its hatred or caprice.'<sup>83</sup> This is the cost of misusing political language: the collapse of social order, the introduction of despotism, and the corruption of morality. The danger of demagogues is encapsulated in this sketchy passage of disjointed prose.

### Classrooms

If Ferguson's occasional remarks on the American and French Revolutions reflect his continuing concern about the misuse of speech in politics, the student training he provided in the classrooms of Edinburgh offers some insight into the knowledge he deemed a prerequisite for active citizens to contribute to the general good. As David Kettler has noted, he was presenting his thoughts to 'a student body many of whom he thought were destined for the emerging imperial civil service or professional army'.<sup>84</sup> In the perfunctory *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy* – the published bullet points of his lectures that Ferguson issued to help students in 1766 – the perspective was very much one taken from the apex of the hierarchy. Declaring 'government is founded on subordination,' he observed 'institutional subordination is the actual distribution of power,' power being 'the force of the state committed to the direction of certain persons, for the performance of some public function.'<sup>85</sup> In this, the good of the state was thought to define and direct the commonweal of the people. Even if he accepted 'the result of wise legislation, jurisdiction and execution is public liberty', this was further defined to ensure that 'liberty is the security of rights'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Adam Ferguson, 'Of the French Revolution' in Merolle (ed.) *The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson*, 139.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>84</sup> Kettler, 'Political Education'. 88. Richard Sher has calculated that 'When Adam Ferguson was teaching ... average class size rose to sixty-four'. Richard B. Sher, 'Professors of Virtue: The Social History of the Edinburgh Moral Philosophy Chair in the Eighteenth Century' in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 122.

<sup>85</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy for the Use of Students in the College of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1766), 50, 51, 51.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

This model of positive liberty was embedded within the *Principles of Moral and Political Science* also, but in the later text – which drew on, expanded and solidified Ferguson's lectures from across his career – the balance between the varied elements in the constitution was more equitable. He expressly stated 'Establishments are meant for the good of the people, and the people also serve to support their establishment.'<sup>87</sup> This formulation has an echo of Montesquieu's notion of a spirit of laws, in which the sentiments of the legislators are expressive of the manners of the people. Ferguson expresses it this way: 'we thus contend for the propriety of manners adapted to the constitution of the state'.<sup>88</sup> In consequence, the defining element for all state systems was where they located power. Once again Ferguson divided states into three types: monarchies, republics, and despotisms. Republics were further subdivided into democracies, in which the people as a whole governed, and aristocracies, where an oligarchy gathered power to itself. If monarchy pursued the virtue of honour, and despotism was governed by the spirit of fear; republics were motivated by the pursuit of liberty (not however licentiousness, its degraded condition).

In Ferguson's ontology of republics, and in particular, in democratic systems, 'the habits of the statesman and the warrior are required as ordinary accomplishments of the citizen; and the individual is entitled to estimation only in proportion as he possesses these habits.'<sup>89</sup> Similarly, in aristocracies, he identified a prerequisite that citizens play their prescribed role, and contributed what the system asked of them. 'Elevation and dignity are suited to the rank in person of one condition', he opined, 'deference and respect are suited to the rank in those of another', he continued, before concluding that 'without suitable distinction of character different orders of men would be disqualified from their situations, and a community so made up of discordant parts would be unfit to maintain the establishment in which the public order consists.'<sup>90</sup> Taken together these observations allow some sense to be made of Ferguson's mandate as a Professor of Moral Philosophy. He deemed it necessary to inculcate his class in the virtues of the statesman, given their position at the apex of Edinburgh's local, Scotland's national, and Britain's imperial state system. Accordingly, he informed them of how 'the utmost to be expected among citizens in this state of disparity is that the superior should, by his noble qualities, merit the respect which is paid to him; or earn the returns of affection and gratitude by the good

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<sup>87</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 412.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 416.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 414.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 415–16.

he performs.<sup>91</sup> The students were to be worthy of the privileged standing in society into which they were about to make their entry. This moral imperative came with a warning, for Ferguson further asserted: ‘The want of a fit character, in public spirit, ability and vigour, prepares the state from within for immediate subversion, as a fabric is prepared to tumble or fall into ruin by the weakness or decay of the parts that compose it.’<sup>92</sup> Failure to lead would result in ‘revolutions of uncertain or dangerous issue.’<sup>93</sup> The students had a country to win, and a state to lose, and Ferguson was determined to inform them of the wager the society had taken on their moral and political capabilities.

### Conclusions

Finally, it is worth observing the primacy Ferguson placed on speech acts in his pedagogical practice. As Richard Sher has observed, ‘His lectures were lively and were usually spoken from outlines or unpolished lecture notes rather than read in a formal manner.’<sup>94</sup> A rationale for this practice was given by Ferguson in the introduction to the *Principles* – a text which drew on and expanded his lectures once his retirement allowed a degree of finality to be cast over the material. ‘Conceiving that discussion’, he wrote, ‘and even information, might come with more effect from a person that was making his own highest efforts of disquisition and judgement, than from one that might be languishing while he read, or repeated a lecture previously composed, he determined...to have no more in writing than the heads or short notes from which he was to speak.’<sup>95</sup> Indeed, he found that even after he published first the *Pneumatics* and then the *Institutes* as notebooks for his class ‘he nevertheless experienced that the course he was to follow...was subject to some variations; and as these appeared to be improvements, and served to enliven his own talk with some accessions of novelty, he did not attempt to check or restrain them.’<sup>96</sup> In sum, Ferguson believed that the spoken word was a better vehicle for exhortatory and emulative instruction than the written page.

Students understood this ambition and responded accordingly. One remarked ‘His was a manly spirited, practical philosophy, intended to rear active, useful and disinterested citizens, to attend to and promote the welfare of

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., II: 416.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., II: 415.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., II: 416.

<sup>94</sup> Sher, ‘Professors of Virtue’, 116.

<sup>95</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: v.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., I: vi.

their country.<sup>97</sup> Ferguson himself explained, in closing the academic session of 1775-6 that he had ‘endeavoured to set the example of fair and unexceptional argument on particular subjects’ and ‘addressed my weak endeavours to the feelings of the mind as well as the understanding.’<sup>98</sup> He continued instructing the students: ‘now is your time to begin practices & lay the foundation of habits that may be of use to you in every condition and in every profession at least that is founded on a literary or Liberal education. Sapere & fari quae sentiat [To be discerning and to express what one thinks] are the great objects of literary education and study.’<sup>99</sup>

The above charge to his students captures something of the value for Ferguson of a moral education, and in doing so centralises the issue of clear, concise and persuasive expression. Indeed, by tracing the theme of oratory in the work of Adam Ferguson, a number of issues which may otherwise perplex became apparent. First, the moral value he placed on oratory helps to explain the dizzying variety of his activities. His work spans the range from the pulpit to the stage, from the senate to the classroom. In each case, however, oratory, and its moral purpose, is central. Second, in reading Ferguson through the lens of oratory, his work is positioned in a critical eighteenth-century debate that took in issues that are resonant through his wider corpus: primitivism, imperialism, the exemplar of the Roman republic, and the moral character of political debate. Third, oratory reconfigures Ferguson’s interventions on contemporary politics – notably the Revolutions in America and France – and relates his thoughts to a British debate about participatory politics and fear of the mob, the demagogue, and civil unrest.<sup>100</sup> Finally, the construction of oratory as a skill of the elderly, one which develops as physical ability declines, casts light on Ferguson didacticism as a Professor of Moral Philosophy. Sher has suggested that Ferguson was concerned

to mould teenage boys into virtuous, polite, tolerably learned, self-confident, upstanding, patriotic young gentlemen. They were to be moderate Christians, benevolent and responsible, but also prudent and proper, in accordance with the teachings of Cicero and the Stoics. They were also to be firm Whigs and good British citizens, loyal to the

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<sup>97</sup> Sher, ‘Professors of Virtue’, 119.

<sup>98</sup> EUL vol1: DC I. 84; vol2 Dc I. 85. Quoted in Sher, ‘Professors of Virtue’, 117–18.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. Here Ferguson is quoting Horace, *Epistles*, I, iv, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Hanoverian regime and the constitution on which it was thought to be founded.<sup>101</sup>

All true, but the primacy of oratory in his pedagogy, and the role it plays in his thinking suggests something more: Ferguson was not teaching the young men who crowded his classroom about how to be young. That was what the militia was for. Rather, and more challenging in its ambition, he was instructing his students on how to be old.

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<sup>101</sup> Sher, 'Professors of Virtue', 118.

## 2

# Adam Ferguson: Moral Science and Moralising

Craig Smith

... but notorious facts are foundation enough, upon which we may safely erect the fabric of moral science, so far as it is of any importance to mankind . . .<sup>1</sup>

Adam Ferguson is not always the most consistent of thinkers, but the apparent inconsistencies in his writings offer the generously minded reader the often interesting puzzle of trying to re-construct a coherent position from his thought.<sup>2</sup> One such puzzle seems to be central to his work as a whole: the nature of the moral science that he purported to be advocating. I want to explore this puzzle by trying to understand the relationship between the empirical and normative elements in Ferguson's writing, or, in other words, to understand the relationship between moral science and moralising in his work.

Ferguson's reputation as a 'father' of modern social science has always been accompanied by an awareness that he remained wedded to a particular form of traditional moralising. Duncan Forbes cautioned against reading too much into Ferguson's thought on the grounds that 'the social science is subordinate to Ferguson's main concern, which is morals.'<sup>3</sup> David Kettler notes that Ferguson was primarily a moralist who wanted his system to be useful for practical judgment: 'Sociology and political science, considered as empirical and descriptive disciplines, became relevant for Ferguson only as aids to a task which was primarily evaluative in character.'<sup>4</sup> Lisa Hill has similarly observed

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (2 Vols, Edinburgh and London: A Strahan, T. Cadell and W. Creech, 1792), I: 155.

<sup>2</sup> The author wishes to thank Jack Hill and the participants in the *Ferguson After the Essay* Workshop at the University of Aberdeen in February 2014 for their helpful comments on the paper. All remaining errors are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Duncan Forbes, 'Introduction' in Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Duncan Forbes (ed.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), xiii–xli, xxv.

<sup>4</sup> David Kettler, *Adam Ferguson: His Social and Political Thought* (New Brunswick:

that Ferguson's work seems to involve 'a procedure simultaneously empirical and normative.'<sup>5</sup> A stronger line is taken by David Allan who suggests that Ferguson was 'in no sense the objective purveyor of a descriptive science of society' but rather 'a shameless partisan for the cause of virtue.'<sup>6</sup> Ryan Hanley concurs and extends this view to the whole of the Scottish Enlightenment. He sees the moral science of the eighteenth-century Scots as being driven by a desire to make normative claims in a way that makes it quite distinct from the strict empirical/normative separation in contemporary social and political science.<sup>7</sup> The puzzle here arises because Ferguson's tendency to blend normative and empirical arguments is undertaken alongside a sustained and careful attempt to distinguish between empirical and normative modes of argument. As a result it is not immediately apparent how he envisioned the two aspects of his thought to be related.

Both Lisa Hill and David Kettler seek the answer to this question by noting a teleological element in Ferguson's thought that shows the influence of Aristotle, Stoic theodicy and natural law thinking.<sup>8</sup> In what follows I want to explore this idea and follow through on its implications for the structure of Ferguson's writings. I have argued elsewhere that Ferguson made a deliberate attempt to prevent the act of moral judgment from clouding empirical analyses.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, he wants clear headed, unbiased empirical evidence to provide the material upon which to exercise moral judgments. However, this leaves open the precise nature of the relationship between the factual evidence of empirical enquiry and the moral judgment that he hopes to erect upon it. His aim is stated in reasonably clear terms:

I am ambitious to show that there is a science of manners or of Ethics, no less than of Jurisprudence or of Politics, and for this purpose would

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Transaction Press, 2005), 224.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Hill, *The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Dordrecht: Springer Press, 2006), 57.

<sup>6</sup> David Allan, *Adam Ferguson* (Aberdeen: AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Culture, 2007), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Hanley's focus is on contemporary Anglo-American social science as opposed to the more normatively engaged critical traditions stemming from Marxism. Ryan Patrick Hanley, 'Social Science and Human Flourishing: The Scottish Enlightenment and Today', *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 7 (2009), 29–46, particularly 30.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, *Passionate Society*, 7–8, 34; Kettler, *Adam Ferguson*, 120–1.

<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, despite his tendency to blend normative and empirical arguments, was aware of the danger posed by interpreting one culture in terms developed in another culture and the threat that it posed to his own project. See Craig Smith, 'Adam Ferguson and Ethnocentrism in the Science of Man', *History of the Human Sciences*, 26 (2013), 52–67.

willingly point out a method, by which to derive the offices or duties of a virtuous life from principles at once so comprehensive and unquestionably evident, as to enable every person to fill up the detail for himself.<sup>10</sup>

Before proceeding it is as well to lay out an important underlying theme in Ferguson's thought, one which he shared with his colleagues in the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the relationship between empirical and normative enquiry in his writing, and however much he was willing to cede to cultural diversity, Ferguson was no cultural relativist. As he put it: 'We have not any sufficient reason to believe that men, of remote ages and nations, differ from one another otherwise than by habits acquired in a different manner of life . . .'.<sup>12</sup> Ferguson's famous rejection of the loose use of the term 'nature'<sup>13</sup> in state of nature theories in the *Essay* might, it has been suggested, have opened a door to cultural relativism that Ferguson was unwilling to face.<sup>14</sup> However, I will argue it is precisely this diversity that provides the material for Ferguson's moral science.

Ferguson's well-known rejection of state of nature theories is based on the accusation that they present highly selective hypothetical versions of 'natural' man upon which they then proceed to erect a normative system.<sup>15</sup> Ferguson's demand is that our attempts to understand social man are grounded in observation and the historical record. This record displays a wide variety of human practices and beliefs and in his view, it is not enough to privilege some and to discount others along some putative notion of naturalness. If 'all the actions of man are equally the result of their nature' then one might be tempted to give up on 'nature' as a useful notion in moral argumentation.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, that is not how Ferguson proceeds. Instead, he seeks to account for diversity

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<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 321–2.

<sup>11</sup> As Christopher Berry has observed this was a widespread view in the Scottish Enlightenment. Christopher J Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 31–2.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 221.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>14</sup> David Allan has argued that: 'Nor is it even clear that Ferguson himself, despite – or most likely because of – his primary duties as a moralist, had thoroughly faced up to this extraordinary consequence of his own, and the Enlightenment's, dalliance with cultural relativism: after all, this was a potentially bottomless chasm, necessarily fatal to all orthodox moral doctrines, into which he, like most of his colleagues, was simply unprepared to peer.' Allan, *Adam Ferguson*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

in human behaviour as the reaction of a universal human nature to particular circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

My contention here is that Ferguson's attempt to think through the relationship between empirically based social theory and traditional moralising is conducted against this backdrop. The hope is that 'science' will allow us to move beyond the apparent diversity of practices and beliefs about morality. As he puts it in the *Essay*: 'It is the purpose of science, not to disguise this confusion in its object, but, in the multiplicity and combination of particulars, to find the principal points which deserve our attention, and which, being well understood, save us from the embarrassment which the varieties of singular cases might otherwise create.'<sup>18</sup>

For Ferguson there are both facts about a universal human nature and a universally binding moral order in the universe. Human nature is plastic, but that plasticity has both factual and normative boundaries for Ferguson. The question before us is, 'What is the relationship between the conclusions of moral judgment and the evidence of moral science?' The answer to this question in Ferguson's case is to be found in the existence of certain universal principles of mind and character that can be observed in all cultures. It is upon the universal features of human nature that Ferguson builds his normative arguments. The process begins by the empirical identification of these principles, proceeds through the identification of distinctly human characteristics and issues in prescriptively binding moral rules. In other words, it is no crude description of the 'nature' of man trading on that claim to convince of the veracity of its principles. He is, perhaps even despite himself, engaging in a reformulation of the approaches that he inherited from Aristotle, the Stoics, and the natural lawyers with a view to developing an empirically grounded account of human nature in all its complexity.

Annette Meyer points to this kind of reading when she describes Ferguson's project in terms of an attempt to identify two kinds of laws of nature that map onto his distinct, but related, empirical and normative concerns: laws of

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of Ferguson's understanding of the naturalness of artifice see Christopher J. Berry, 'But Art Itself is Natural to Man': Ferguson and the Principle of Simultaneity' in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 143–53. It is worth noting here that the procedure that Ferguson is outlining is intended to identify the 'real' moral laws and the obligation they hold for mankind. Thus at least part of Ferguson's objection to contract theory is that it seeks to provide a hypothetical account of obligation rather than an 'empirical' account. See Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: A Kincaid and J Bell: 1769), 220–1.

<sup>18</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 71–2.

nature of how human beings ‘are’ and of how they ‘should be’.<sup>19</sup> As Kettler observes: ‘Ferguson sought to defend the possibility of a scientific moral theory unbounded by mere facts while insisting that all scientific knowledge rests on the perception and consciousness of facts.’<sup>20</sup> However this is not a promise that Ferguson finds easy to keep, and there are a number of passages where he displays a problematic inconsistency in this regard.<sup>21</sup> The puzzle is, ‘What, precisely is the relationship between the empirical and the normative elements of Ferguson’s thought?’

## Method

As the quotation at the head of this essay demonstrates Ferguson clearly saw empirical facts as offering some support for his normative principles, but was equally clear on the gap between the two modes of inquiry. This is something that he makes quite explicit in the opening sections of the three published versions of his Edinburgh lectures. For example, we have the opening passages of the *Principles*: ‘In treating of Man, as a subject of history, we collect facts, and endeavour to conceive his nature as it actually is, or has actually been, apart from any notion of ideal perfection, or defect.’<sup>22</sup> We also have Ferguson stating: ‘In treating of him as a subject of moral science, we endeavour to understand what he ought to be; without being limited, in our conception, to the measure of attainment or failure, exhibited in the case of any particular person or society of men.’<sup>23</sup>

The distinction here between history and moral science is repeated throughout Ferguson’s writings. However, it is complicated by further layers of distinction between physical science and moral science, and between moral science and moral philosophy. In what follows I try to unpick these various distinctions as they appear in the *Analysis*, the *Institutes* and the *Principles*. At the start of each of these books Ferguson sets out the definitions of key terms and their relationships. It is worth looking at each of these in a little more detail.

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<sup>19</sup> Meyer goes on to situate Ferguson in relation to the strain of historical thinking that would develop into hermeneutics. Annette Meyer, ‘Ferguson’s ‘Appropriate Stile’ in Combining History and Science: The History of Historiography Revisited’ in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 131–45.

<sup>20</sup> Kettler, *Adam Ferguson*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 2.

*Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy* (1766)

Ferguson begins by defining Science as an ‘attainment of mind’ capable of being understood under two headings: ‘as it refers to a particular subject; or as it tends to a particular object or end.’<sup>24</sup> He then distinguishes History, which is knowledge of ‘particulars in detail’, from Science which ‘is knowledge of general principles.’<sup>25</sup> Science – ‘when considered with a view to its subject’ – is then divided into Abstract and Applicate.<sup>26</sup> Applicate science, in turn, is further divided into ‘two branches:’ one which Ferguson refers to as the ‘Material System’ and another which he terms ‘Intellectual.’<sup>27</sup> Human nature treated physically is Pneumatics. Human nature treated morally is Moral Philosophy.<sup>28</sup>

*Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1769)

Ferguson begins by claiming that ‘The knowledge of facts is prior to that of rules,’ and notes that such knowledge is ‘the first requisite ... in the conduct of affairs.’<sup>29</sup> He then distinguishes between History, which deals with ‘facts’ and Science which deals with ‘general rules.’<sup>30</sup> The next distinction that he makes is between Analytic and Synthetic. Analytic inquiry moves from facts to rules and is the method of investigation. Synthetic inquiry moves from rules to particulars: its immediate use is the communication or ‘enlargement’ of science.<sup>31</sup> This distinction is followed by that between different Laws of Nature: Physical laws of nature concern facts and they are the object of science, their immediate use is ‘theory.’ Moral Laws of Nature are a general expression of what is good for man and ‘exist’ in being obligatory, their ‘immediate use’ is choice, practice and conduct.<sup>32</sup>

This line of argument would seem to suggest that, if he is being consistent, Ferguson’s Moral Science must have its ultimate basis in facts – or at the very least that he has a strong commitment to the empirical method. His claim would appear to be that moral philosophy is grounded in moral science, and moral science is the application of the analytical approach to the facts of history.

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<sup>24</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy for the Use of Students in the College of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1766), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 2–3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 6.

*Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792)

By the time we reach the start of the *Principles* we find Ferguson appearing to use moral science to cover what he had previously distinguished as moral science and moral philosophy. Ferguson begins by repeating the distinction between history, which collects facts and treats man as he is, and moral science, in which 'we endeavour to understand what he ought to be; without being limited, in our conception, to the measure of attainment or failure, exhibited in the case of any particular person or society of men.'<sup>33</sup> Ferguson places the distinction between facts and judgment at the heart of the work. Indeed, he builds the distinction into the design of the book. He says that the conscious design of the book in two parts mirrors the distinction between 'Facts' and 'Principles of Right' – a point he reiterates at the beginning of volume two.<sup>34</sup> When he comes to consider the connection between the two enquiries he claims that: 'the facts are presented not as discoveries, but as the data, from which to infer the judgments and conclusions of the second part. . .'<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the factual enquiry of the 'history' in the first volume is intended to form the basis for the second volume, which concerns articulating principles pertaining to 'choice'. We will return to the added complication of the use of the term of moral philosophy below.

Despite the shifting and apparently inconsistent definitions and uses of the key terms at least one feature seems to be consistent: in each of the books Ferguson is drawing a clear set of distinctions between history and science, between fact and value, and between moral and physical. However, things are a little more complicated than the bipartite division of the *Principles* would seem to suggest. At the beginning of volume two he admits that the neat distinctions between history and science and between the moral and the physical have been violated in his actual discussion. It is worth looking at this passage in some detail as it involves a discussion of what Ferguson takes to be the relationship between the two aspects of the book which is part apologia and part methodological justification.

The distinction of physical and moral science has been stated in the former part of this work; the one being occupied in solving questions of theory or fact, the other in solving questions of right: But, notwithstanding the proposed method required that questions of fact, or mere

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<sup>33</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 9; II, 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 10.

explanation, should be considered apart from questions of estimation and choice; yet the good of which man is susceptible, and the evil, to which he is exposed, *having frequently occurred, as facts of the greatest importance relating to him; and the advancement of moral science itself having made a considerable article in the history of his pursuits and attainments*; it was impossible not to touch upon these subjects, in laying out the foundation of this more particular discussion, in which we are now to proceed.

Having, however, in the former part, chiefly attended to the facts constituent of man's actual state, and serving to form his capacity and give intimation of his future prospects; we are now, in the continuation of our method, come to a point at which the distinction of good and evil, and its applications, are the direct and immediate objects of our inquiry. But as in the past, where the statement of fact was the principal object, we could not always with-hold some view as to its consequence; so now, *although our principal object is to pursue the inference to be drawn from facts already stated*; yet, as we may, by referring to former observations, sometimes incur the charge of repetition; it is hoped that the favour, due to a subject so important, may plead in excuse of the necessary references, even if they should be repeated.<sup>36</sup>

It is clear that Ferguson is continuing to assert the conceptual distinction between explanatory physical science and normative moral science. Yet, both are equally 'scientific'. As he states clearly on the next page: 'Science, in every application of the term, implies the knowledge of some one or more general principles with their applications whether directing the will, or in explaining appearances, and connecting together our conceptions of things.'<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, there is also supposed to be a clear link between the explanation of human behaviour grounded in observation of facts and the identification of moral principles that ought to guide human choice. The passage above is followed by a discussion of Stoicism and Epicureanism as contrasting systems of thought with distinct views of the nature of man and the content of moral principles.<sup>38</sup>

In retrospect, what are we to make of this? Is Ferguson offering a confused and confusing excuse for failing to avoid the temptation of mixing the descriptive and the normative? Does he simply fail to maintain the distinction between history and science and moral science and moral philosophy as modes

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., II: 1–2 (my emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., II: 2.

<sup>38</sup> It is this sort of passage that prompts Lisa Hill to view Ferguson as attempting to develop a teleological theory. See Hill, *Passionate Society*, 207.

of inquiry? Or might we attempt to find a more charitable explanation of his thinking here?

### Facts about Human Nature and Facts Pertaining to the History of Moral Beliefs

From what Ferguson says at the beginning of volume two of the *Principles* it should be clear that he both believes in an objective moral order and rejects the notion that such an order is easily identified with existing belief systems. The much noted qualification in the *Principles* concerning his supposed preference for Stoicism prompts the defence that he 'is not conscious of having warped the truth to suit with any system whatever.'<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the discussion of Epicureanism and Stoicism is clearly intended to be undertaken in the light of the account of human nature provided by the descriptive analysis of volume one. Lisa Hill has commented on this aspect of Ferguson's approach: 'Ferguson rarely allows his moral prejudices to interfere with the empirical evidence.'<sup>40</sup> Put crudely he is suggesting that if we are to have a reliable moral science to guide judgment then that science must be grounded on evidence about human nature. This formulation appears at a number of points in his post-*Essay* writings.

For example, in the *Institutes* Ferguson writes: 'Before we can ascertain rules of morality for mankind, the history of man's nature, his dispositions, his specific enjoyments and sufferings, his condition and future prospects, should be known.'<sup>41</sup> In the *Principles*, shortly after the passages above, he argues:

To investigate such a principle relating to man, it will be necessary to recollect what is known of himself; and of the situation in which he is placed. Our information is to be collected from his experience of what is agreeable or disagreeable to him, and the result will amount to a choice of that, on which he is chiefly to rely for his happiness, and to caution against that, of which he is chiefly to beware as leading to misery.<sup>42</sup>

The point seems to be that we can identify man's nature and what in general terms makes him happy, and build our moral science on this. Read in this way, Ferguson's post-*Essay* work is a sustained response to the errors of the supposed naturalism of the social contract theorists that he attacks in the opening section of the *Essay*.

<sup>39</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 7.

<sup>40</sup> Hill, *Passionate Society*, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 9–10.

<sup>42</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 3.

However, in Ferguson's view, the erection of moral science must be undertaken while being mindful of the further distinction between facts from the history of human moral beliefs and principles drawn from human nature about what we ought to believe. He observes that we often fail to separate what we blame in practice from what we 'ought' to blame, and that as a result 'The subject of morality has been greatly perplexed by the blending of these questions together.'<sup>43</sup> Good normative moral philosophy requires secure knowledge of human nature and human experience. Further, such knowledge requires careful scientific observation and generalisation from experience. Part of this process will be the examination of what human beings have actually considered to be the principles of morality.

In moral science (as in physical science) we infer a law of nature 'from a sufficient number of facts'.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the facts under examination in moral science are not limited to the physical history of man, but include the history of the species and its beliefs about right and wrong. When Ferguson argues that 'The history of the human will may furnish these following general rules' and proceeds on analogy with gravitation, he is not saying that the moral good must be limited to what has been thought good by various people in the past.<sup>45</sup> Instead, he is seeking an application of the theory of human nature in general. In attending to what people have thought to be good and evil we are not compelled to limit our understanding of the moral law to their beliefs, but we can use what they have believed as evidence to think about good and evil for beings like us. 'In physical questions, we attend to the facts; in moral questions, to what is good and evil,'<sup>46</sup> but as Ferguson noted in the passage discussed above, there are facts about what people have believed to be good or evil.

Moral science involves critical engagement with existing systems of moral principle, but that engagement is undertaken in the light of facts about human nature. One example of this is found in the passages in the *Essay* where Ferguson criticises the 'selfish' system of philosophy advanced by the likes of Bernard Mandeville. Ferguson's assertion here is that in attempting to reduce all of moral motivation to one principle such systems ignore much of what experience tells us about how humans experience moral judgment. The accusation then is that such thinkers have mistaken 'the obtrusion of a mere innovation in

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<sup>43</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 109.

<sup>44</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 87.

<sup>45</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 90.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

language for a discovery in science<sup>47</sup> and that in doing so they sacrifice accuracy of analysis for ‘cleverness of system.’

### Naturalism and Distinctive Moral Reasoning

The other ‘clear’ discussion of the relationship between the two parts of Ferguson’s inquiry comes when he seeks to distance himself from the thought of Hume, Smith and others whom he charges with a lack of interest in going beyond the descriptive.<sup>48</sup> Again, it is worth looking at this passage in some detail:

To substitute theory, even of mind, for moral science would be an error and an abuse. This abuse, indeed, has been incurred by many, who take the distinction of physical and moral science from the subjects to which they relate, not from the objects to which they are directed. Physical science they suppose to be a knowledge of subjects material; moral science, a knowledge of mind, or of subjects intellectual: And they accordingly place theoretical speculation on the subject of mind, among the discussions of moral philosophy. In their apprehension, moral approbation and disapprobation are mere phenomena to be explained; and, in such explanations their science of morals actually terminates. The phenomena of moral approbation have been supposed no more than a diversified appearance of the consideration that is paid to private interest, to public utility, to the reason of things; or they have been supposed to result from the sympathy of one man with another.

But if moral sentiment could be thus explained into any thing different from itself, whether interest, utility, reason or sympathy, this could amount to no more than theory. And it were difficult to say to what effect knowledge is improved, by resolving a first act of the mind into a second, no way better known than the first. The effect of a theory so applied, for the most part, has been to render the distinction of good and evil more faint than it commonly appears under the ordinary expressions of esteem and love, or of indignation and scorn.<sup>49</sup>

The main thrust of this passage is the rejection of an overly explanatory and

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<sup>47</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Kettler, *Adam Ferguson*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 161.

insufficiently prescriptive tendency of many of his contemporaries. It is followed by a criticism of Smith:

If sympathy is admitted as the principle of moral estimation, it is evident that we admit, as a standard of good, what may itself, on occasion, be erroneous and evil, or what ought not to be esteemed beyond what is just and proper; limits which presuppose that there is a prior standard of moral estimation, by which even the rectitude of sympathy itself is to be judged.<sup>50</sup>

The point is made against the relativistic conclusions of a system based on sympathy which Ferguson believes leaves us without a means of deciding between competing sympathetically generated beliefs about morality. To be fair to Smith, this is something that he was aware of and made some attempt to address in the passage at the end of Part V of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* where he discusses custom and infanticide.<sup>51</sup> Smith's discussion neatly mirrors Ferguson's accusation and seeks to deal with it by suggesting that the underlying universality of 'humanity' will overcome such a 'perversion' of the sentiments.<sup>52</sup>

However, Ferguson's criticism of his contemporaries is confusing because once again the initially clear distinctions are wielded in a less than clear fashion. The added complication of the re-introduction of the terms 'moral philosophy' in addition to moral science muddies the water further. Even if Ferguson has switched to using the two as synonyms, as was common at the time, we are still left with the observation that: 'The investigation and application of them [laws of nature] . . . may be considered as an operation essential to the intelligent nature of man; and is that branch in the *history* of the human mind which we term *Moral Philosophy*.'<sup>53</sup> Now to be charitable we might read him as saying that previous systems of moral philosophy/science form part of the 'facts' of the history of the human mind and that these facts might then be assessed in the light of the principles generated by moral science. But this does not fit neatly onto the terminology as laid out in any of the three books.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., I: 162.

<sup>51</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (eds) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), 210–11.

<sup>52</sup> It is also worth noting that Smith points out that philosophers failed to criticise the practice and sought to explain it as 'natural' and thus raises precisely the issue that I contend Ferguson is seeking to address. Compare Smith's view with the criticism of human sacrifice in Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 154.

<sup>53</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 162 (my emphasis and my insertion of phrase in brackets).

### Teleology, Principles and Application

The identification of the principles of moral science is pursued through a combination of self-reflection and empirical observation of the practices of existing societies to develop ‘the theory of human nature.’<sup>54</sup> Ferguson’s aim is to identify moral laws from this inquiry; ‘The abstract form and expression of what is excellent or good, is a moral law, and a principle of moral science.’<sup>55</sup> Once identified these laws will help to inform moral judgment. Self-reflection and the study of history will allow the identification of ‘the intimate principles of our own nature.’<sup>56</sup> Ferguson’s apparent point in stressing an empirical element in his moral philosophy is to avoid detaching philosophy from human experience: ‘Our knowledge of what any nature ought to be, must be derived from our knowledge of its faculties and powers; and the attainment to be aimed at must be of the kind which these faculties and powers are fitted to produce.’<sup>57</sup> The process is ‘scientific’ because it is based on the search for universal and general rules of what humans ought to do derived from what, in part, they have thought that they ought to be. This process remains grounded in empirical observation and comparison of lived human experience as a check against the sort of partial accounts that are found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes.

Such knowledge, if it is to avoid cultural bias or excessive abstraction, must take account of the evidence of how humanity as a species have experienced moral life: ‘To know human nature, therefore, we must avail ourselves not only of the consciousness or reflection of a single mind, but, more at large also, of the *varieties* that have presented in the history of mankind.’<sup>58</sup> Examination of a universal human nature in its response to diverse social circumstances will, in Ferguson’s view, allow the moral scientist to identify universal aspects of human experience. By reflecting on such aspects, Ferguson hopes to identify certain basic forms of human social experience: ‘There are certain relations essential to every society.’<sup>59</sup> Ferguson believed that universal principles could be derived from comparative analysis – that is, they could be formulated by examining the interaction of human beings with their institutions and moral beliefs in light of the above basic forms of human experience. As a result we will be able to identify what is ‘evidently salutary’ and ‘pernicious.’ This, in turn, provides a

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<sup>54</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 113.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 49 (my emphasis).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 271.

more solid basis for the philosophical identification of the normative principles which will then facilitate moral judgment.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, judgment remains separate from empirical data and generalisations or ‘theory’ drawn from it, but crucially judgment is informed by that information.<sup>61</sup>

One manifestation of this approach is the conspicuous recourse to teleological and perfectionist arguments noted by Hill and Kettler.<sup>62</sup> Ferguson’s aim of seeking ‘truths’ about human nature upon which to identify ‘truths’ about the good for that creature in a ‘scientific’ fashion leads him to seek general principles. As he puts it: ‘The first great point to be settled, therefore, in forming any system of morals, is the specific good competent to human nature, that in which the individual can most benefit himself and his fellow creatures.’<sup>63</sup> As Ferguson himself admits the identification of such a conception of the good is not limited to what has been achieved by any particular individual or group of individuals in the past. However, the relation between observation and a theory of human nature is supposed to prevent his account of moral perfection from becoming unrealistic.<sup>64</sup> Each individual and society will have its own beliefs about moral goodness: ‘the principle of moral approbation is the Idea of perfection that intelligent beings form for themselves’, but the point of moral science is to engage in comparison and generalisation to introduce rigour into the subject.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly the principle that Ferguson hits upon is suitably general in form. The observation that ‘the love of mankind is the greatest good to which human nature is competent’ is hardly ground-breaking, but within the framework of moral science it may give Ferguson some traction in analysing different forms of society and avoiding the ‘trap’ of moral relativism that he identified with Smith’s approach.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., II: 152–3.

<sup>61</sup> The method is also grounded on the comparative evidence of the historical record. All societies have a conception of right and wrong, something which Ferguson, inspired by Reid, takes as evidence for the reality of moral distinctions. See Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Derek R. Brooks (ed.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). As Ferguson would have it: ‘The distinction of right and wrong is coeval with human nature: It is perceived without instruction, in acts of fidelity and beneficence, or of perfidy and malice. These are topics of praise and blame, in every nation and age’ (Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 300). The same point is used against Mandeville in Ferguson, *Essay*, 36–7.

<sup>62</sup> Hill, *Passionate Society*, 121, 207 and Kettler, *Adam Ferguson*, 117–18.

<sup>63</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 309.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., II: 71.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., II: 134.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., II: 149.

Ferguson offers an example of the method at work in his political science. He states that the basic principle regarding forms of government is 'salus populi suprema lex esto' (the welfare of the people shall be the supreme law).<sup>67</sup> When he applies this principle in comparative judgment of forms of government we find that the evidence of political science allows us to compare social structures for their normative merit. As he puts it: '[if under] one species of establishment, we observe the persons and possessions of men to be secure, and their genius to prosper; under another, prevalent disorder, insult, wrong, with a continual degradation or suppression of all the talents of men, we cannot be at a loss on which to bestow preference.'<sup>68</sup> From this we can conclude that the knowledge produced by moral science can provide meaningful universally applicable generalizations that will help guide our moral and political action: 'The specific principle of moral science is some general expression of what is good, and fit to determine the choice of moral agents in the detail of their conduct'. Furthermore, this principle also provides us with a normative yardstick against which to measure actual societies.<sup>69</sup> We also find an example of the method in action in the *Institutes*: 'But there being some circumstances common in the situation and disposition of all mankind; such as, their being united in society, and concerned in what relates to their fellow creatures; men universally admire qualities which fit the individual to promote the good of mankind; as, wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance.'<sup>70</sup>

As we noted above Ferguson is both alive to the empirical/normative distinction and to the danger of crude ethnocentrism. His pursuit of what he terms moral science is intended to provide a secure basis for thinking about our moral obligations. One example of Ferguson's endeavours in this direction is his discussion of the problem of interpretation across cultures. In a number of places he describes how apparently different physical actions have the same 'moral' meaning. He describes the difference between raising a hat in Europe and dropping a slipper in Japan in these terms.<sup>71</sup> In the *Institutes* he goes further and discusses apparently very different funeral rites and attitudes towards the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., II: 411. In Ferguson's words, the Latin phrase refers to 'the fundamental principle of political science. If the people be happy, we have no title to enquire to what other purpose they serve, for this itself is the purpose of all human establishments'.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., II: 499.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., II: 2.

<sup>70</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 38. Another example is found in his discussion of the apparent universality of religious belief. As a case in point, he finds that the apparent universality of the belief in God 'must be the result of human nature, or the suggestion of circumstances that occur in every place or age.' Ibid., 122.

<sup>71</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 142.

elderly as comprehensibly similar in moral meaning.<sup>72</sup> Moral science ought to allow us to identify laws of nature as they apply to moral choice, so the general description of the relationship between laws and diversity should hold here. By digging beneath the forms of manners we will, in Ferguson's optimistic view, be able to get at the shared aspect of human nature and moral practice.

Ferguson's moral science represents an attempt to seek the underlying universalities of human experience through generalisations drawn from the diverse evidence of human practices. The idea is that we can 'abstract what is common and uniform in many operations, from what is singular, and serves to diversify particular instances.'<sup>73</sup> These generalisations must be drawn from observation of 'particulars'<sup>74</sup> if they are to represent more than mere 'hypotheses.' In the case of moral science this demands that we examine the record of history, observe the societies around us, and seek the underlying general principles in operation behind the diversity of practices and beliefs. The process is one of theory building from analysis. Nevertheless, Ferguson is equally clear that its conclusions are not bound to the facts about what people have believed in any given society. The facts are there to be theorised upon, to provide the evidence upon which an attempt to understand the specific good to which human nature is liable might be rested.

Despite his persistent attempts to distinguish the empirical and the normative we might still be tempted to accuse Ferguson of falling prey to something not a million miles away from a Humean naturalistic fallacy.<sup>75</sup> Ferguson certainly seems to be convinced that empirical analysis of human nature and social life are vital for an accurate moral philosophy. However, his separation of the empirical investigation and theory building from the subsequent act of judgment suggests a concern to identify two related, but conceptually distinct, modes of inquiry. Ferguson's view is that good moral philosophy must be moral philosophy for the sorts of beings that mankind actually are. In other words, what we 'ought' to do can only be understood if we understand our nature. One consequence of this is that our standards of moral judgment must be 'realistic' given what we have learned about humans and their social lives. What we have in Ferguson

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<sup>72</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 182.

<sup>73</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I: 112.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 279.

<sup>75</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 469. See also the discussion in David Raynor 'Why Did David Hume Dislike Adam Ferguson's Essay on the History of Civil Society?' in Eugene Heath and Merolle (eds) *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy*, 45–72.

is not the unthinking move from 'is' to 'ought' that Hume noted, but rather a deliberate and careful attempt to relate the empirical and the normative.

### Practical Morals and Moral Theory

Whatever the form of Ferguson's moral science it is also clear that he has an overwhelming interest in developing moral understanding that is to be useful in practice. Moral philosophy, even if informed by moral science, can be of little use in Ferguson's view if it departs from human experience. In responding to the sceptic (Hume perhaps), he argues:

The Sceptic, indeed, sometimes affects to distinguish the provinces of speculation and of action. While, in speculation, he questions the evidence of sense; in practice, he admits it with the most perfect confidence: But speculations in science are surely of little account, if they have not any relation to subjects of actual choice and pursuit; and if they do not prepare the mind for the discernment of matters, relating to which there is actual occasion to decide, and to act, in the conduct of human life.<sup>76</sup>

The main use of moral science is the interrogation of existing systems of moral philosophy in the light of the evidence and principles of moral science. It allows us to reflect on our moral behaviour. As he puts it: 'Moral science operates for our good, only by mending our conceptions of things, and correcting or preventing the errors from which moral depravity or misery proceed.'<sup>77</sup> By demonstrating the differences between what people believe about morality and what people ought to believe about morality, while at the same time keeping the subject grounded in a theory of human nature, Ferguson hoped to avoid the partial accounts of morality put forward by other schools of thought.<sup>78</sup> Moral science will allow us to dispel mistaken principles through the identification of 'real' rather than hypothetical principles upon which to base our moral judgments. Thus armed the practice of moral philosophy will be both more accurate and more useful in informing choice: 'Reason and knowledge may hasten its effects; and for this purpose our feeble endeavours to erect a fabric of science, that they who resort to it may proceed on a just knowledge of their place and destination in the system of nature.'<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, Vol. I, 91.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 73.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 114.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 104–5.

If the aim of moral science is to apply systematic investigation to ‘matters of choice,’ then the hope must be that the choices made in this fashion will be more informed than those made without it.<sup>80</sup> At the same time the ultimate confirmation of science comes from its success in application: ‘The successful application of science, to the production of effects, is the last and most convincing evidence of its reality, or of the truth of its principles.’<sup>81</sup> Therefore, a moral science that allows us to make better moral judgments is, he hoped, to be confirmed by practice.

### **Pedagogy and Book-Learning**

There is, however, a problem with all of this. It seems that Ferguson regards moral science as something that will help to inform actual practical judgment. Yet, this justification of the approach stands in stark contrast to the pedagogical approach to moral exhortation that is to be found in many other parts of his work. For example, in the *Essay* he states that ‘The felicity of our conduct is more owing to the talent we possess for detail, and to the suggestion of particular occasions, than it is to any direction we can find in theory and in general speculations.’<sup>82</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, Ferguson was far more interested in character formation than he was in ‘book-learning.’<sup>83</sup> His contention appears to be that good moral character is better attained through active engagement in social life than it is from reading books of moral philosophy. Consequently, one might wonder what, after all, is the point of the moral science that Ferguson is advocating?

Intriguingly, we may find an answer in precisely the context that started off our discussion: the fact of diversity of moral beliefs. In the *Principles* Ferguson undertakes extended discussions of diversity in moral belief and practice. During the discussion he raises the example of a situation where the practice of moral science helps to ‘justify the individual, when better informed, in counteracting the practice of his own age or country.’<sup>84</sup> Moral science, then, is an antidote to moral conventionalism and parochialism as much as it is an antidote to moral relativism. While most experience of moral judgment takes the form of the exercise of the moral sentiments, there will be times when a greater

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., I: 114.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., I: 282

<sup>82</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 37.

<sup>83</sup> Craig Smith, ‘Adam Ferguson and the Danger of Books’, *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 4 (2006), 93–109; Craig Smith, ‘Ferguson and the Active Genius of Mankind’ in Heath and Merolle (eds) *Adam Ferguson: History*, 157–70.

<sup>84</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 153.

degree of reflection on an issue invites us to have recourse to moral science. Character judgment:

is more a subject of consciousness, or intuitive judgement, than of discussion or reasoning; and they who are, in common life, most decided in their choice of good actions, proceed upon the ground of their affections and sentiments, more than upon any information derived by investigation or research. In attempts at science, however, we must descend to particulars, and endeavour to collect, by induction from the phenomena of that nature we are considering, what may be its destination, and what standard by which its worth is to be estimated.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

Lisa Hill has suggested that Ferguson's diverse sources and influences combine with his desire for 'realism' in such a way that he 'sacrifices elegant simplicity to a qualified and elaborate messiness.'<sup>86</sup> This messiness can frustrate the reader seeking a coherent grasp of Ferguson's thought. However, this seems to be even more pronounced in connection to his understanding of the underlying methodology of his moral science. The confusion here lies not simply in the failure of Ferguson's approach to map easily onto contemporary notions of the division between empirical and normative argument, nor does it stem fully from his combination of influences from Aristotle, stoicism, natural law and Newtonianism. Rather, it ultimately lies in his own expression of the procedure that he saw himself as adopting. What I hope to have shown here is that there may well be a reasonably coherent position lurking beneath the rhetoric of moral exhortation and the confusion of terminology.

The problems that arise from Ferguson's poor expression of his core methodology might lead us to think that he was waffling to avoid the Scylla of an empirically unfounded account of human nature on one side and the Charybdis of relativism on the other – all of this in a manner that sounds unconvincing to readers familiar with the methodology of contemporary social science. However, the reading offered here is attempting to suggest that Ferguson was alive to both concerns and that he was trying to articulate an approach that would allow him to avoid the mistakes of state of nature theorists and provide a more secure basis for moral judgment.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., II: 35–6.

<sup>86</sup> Hill, *Passionate Society*, 34.

The key step in this process was to identify two related but distinct procedures: the scientific examination of human nature and human beliefs about morality, and the application of principles thus derived in the practice of moral judgment. We may be unconvinced by the approach, but it does at least form a coherent intellectual project which suggests that Ferguson was grappling with problems that faced those who were writing at a time when the modern social sciences developed from traditional moral philosophy. As Ferguson observed,

Such, indeed, is the nature of abstract science, we systematise our own thoughts, leaving the application to be separately made. On the subject of morals, more especially, we propose to inquire, not what men actually are; but what they ought to be, or what are the ideas, upon which they may, and ought to determine their choice in particular circumstances.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, II: 70.

## ‘Sovereign of the Sea’: Adam Ferguson on Britain’s Empire

Anna Plassart

Adam Ferguson’s lifelong study of the dangers of imperial rule reflects the complex nature of his contribution to Scottish Enlightenment thought. His largely moral critique of the corrupting and despotic nature of empires certainly stands in contrast to Smith’s more practical discussion of Britain’s colonial possessions, but his support for and personal links to Britain’s imperial policy also illustrate the tensions that marked his critique of commercial society.

Ferguson’s reputation is that of a latter-day classical republican struggling to reconcile Scottish Enlightenment ideas of progress and modernity with ancient ideals of classical virtue. He tends to be erroneously misconceived as a man turned towards the past and nostalgic of ancient politics, offering a counterpoint to Hume and Smith’s celebration of the benefits of commercial modernity. Students of Ferguson’s writings certainly recognise that this reputation is an unfairly caricatured account: just as Smith highlighted the drawbacks and risks associated to commercial society, Ferguson also spent a considerable amount of time and energy warning his contemporaries about the dangers inherent to the popular politics and military aggression he associated with ancient Roman history. By contrast, he fully appreciated some of the advantages of modern commercial society, and recognised the rise of intellectual and commercial exchanges as the natural outcome of the progress of society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On Ferguson’s attempt to reconcile virtue and commercial society, see in particular Lisa Hill, *The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson* (New York: Springer Press, 2006). See also Ronald Hamowy, ‘Progress and Commerce in Anglo-American Thought: The Social Philosophy of Adam Ferguson’, *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 14 (1986), 61–87.

The question of empire encapsulates not only the misunderstandings that have plagued Ferguson's intellectual heritage, but also the tensions within his own understanding of modernity. While a vocal proponent of the virtues of conflict and military spirit, Ferguson was also extremely wary of aggressive expansionism, especially in the context of empire. Though he was critical of the corrupting tendencies of empire in principle, he defended Britain's right to her American colonies, and found much to be optimistic about regarding the British Empire. Through his role in the Carlisle commission, the question of empire also offered Ferguson a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put into practice his long-held conviction that virtue was best nurtured and embodied by political action.

Beyond the towering place occupied by Roman history in Ferguson's intellectual landscape, modern empires (especially as embodied by the British Empire) were absolutely central to Ferguson's experience of eighteenth-century society. Ferguson belonged to a generation that had greatly benefitted from Scotland's post-1707 integration into Britain's Empire, and he lived in a highly inter-connected world. His early academic brilliance had marked him for a religious career, but he was well aware that many of his students would go on to become imperial administrators. His brothers were typical of the eighteenth-century young Scots who left their country to try their chance abroad and took advantage of the opportunities offered by the British trading empire. Charles and Patrick settled in Jamaica, Alexander worked in the wine trade in Bordeaux, and Robert ran away with privateers and later settled in America. On several occasions Ferguson used his connection to his former pupil Dundas to secure positions for his relatives within the Empire. First, he interceded for a brother in August 1780, then a great-nephew placed by Dundas in the East India Company in early 1798, then repeatedly his sons Adam (long an unemployed writer to the signet) and John (a navy officer) in the 1790s and 1800s.<sup>2</sup>

Ferguson himself was initially interested in India; in the 1770s he unsuccessfully attempted to obtain an appointment to an East India Company commission. He kept closely informed of Indian affairs through John MacPherson, his favourite student and frequent correspondent, who became Governor-General of India in 1785 upon Hastings' resignation. With the American war his interest shifted west: in 1776, he published an anonymous pamphlet at government expense, which provided a balanced response to the

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<sup>2</sup> See Ferguson's letters to Henry Dundas in Adam Ferguson, *The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson*, Vincenzo Merolle (ed.) (2 vols, London: William Pickering, 1995).

American revolutionaries. While acknowledging the colonists' reasonable case against Britain's mercantilist policies, he refused to endorse their rebellion against government, and advocated negotiation instead. Two years later, Ferguson was made official secretary to the Carlisle commission. After a summer spent in the colonies, the commission returned to Britain, having failed in its mission to negotiate an agreement with the American congress.

The contradiction between Ferguson's theoretical critique of the corrupting influence of empires and his personal involvement in several aspects of British imperial policy over several decades has not been lost on commentators. David Kettler and Michael Kugler, in particular, have both attempted to resolve this tension by arguing that Ferguson's initial criticism of empire became more nuanced after his involvement in the American Revolution debate and negotiations in the 1770s. They further argue that he came to soften his assessment of an 'absolute conflict between empire and constitutional rule' in the case of the British Empire, while asserting that in the context of continuing war against France, 'nothing less than full unity could protect Great Britain, its empire and its regional people.'<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I argue that Ferguson's critique of empire was more nuanced than it has often been given credit for. His indulgent assessment of the British Empire in the 1770s, I suggest, should not be construed as a softening of his critique of the despotic nature of empires, but rather as proof that he distinguished between several types of empires – and hoped that the British Empire could come to embody the Greek-inspired modern commercial 'federations' praised by Montesquieu. It is not the American Revolution but rather the French Revolution that inflected his thinking most drastically, as France's aggressive republicanism made it increasingly challenging for Britain to stifle the despotic tendencies contained within even the most peaceful commercial empires. As Ferguson spent the last twenty-five years of his long life observing the British military response to revolutionary and Napoleonic France, it became clear to him that Britain's empire was shifting away from such peaceful models. Thus he became increasingly critical not only of France's renewed ambitions of continental despotism, but also of Britain's 'Empire of the seas.'

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<sup>3</sup> David Kettler, 'Political Education for Empire and Revolution' in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 88–9; Michael Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland' in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 139.

### Ferguson's Montesquieuan Critique of Empire

Ferguson first fully expounded his account of the cycle of imperial expansion, corruption, populism, and despotism which he identified in Roman history in his widely successful *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). As he surmised:

We are apt to admire the empire of the Romans, as a model of national greatness and splendour: But the greatness we admire in this case, was ruinous to the virtue and the happiness of mankind; it was found to be inconsistent with all the advantages which that conquering people had formerly enjoyed in the articles of government and manners.<sup>4</sup>

This assessment was greatly indebted to Montesquieu's account of ancient and modern systems of government, as presented in the *Considerations on the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* and *Spirit of the Laws*.<sup>5</sup> Montesquieu's philosophical account of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire was designed to counteract the positive Machiavellian treatment of the Roman model, and to spell out the dangers of republican government, conquest, and expansion for eighteenth-century European monarchies.<sup>6</sup> Following Montesquieu's typology, governments were adapted to the size of their territories: small territories were best governed by republics, larger countries by monarchies, and expansive territories by empires. While Machiavelli had described the expansionist Roman republic as a model to follow (precisely because its expansionist energy counteracted the mechanisms of internal corruption), Montesquieu argued that the opposite was true. To compensate for distance, the executive power must display increased efficiency and ruthlessness: 'Promptness of resolutions must make up for the distance of the places to which they are sent; fear must prevent negligence in the distant governor or magistrate'.<sup>7</sup> Thus Rome started to acquire despotic qualities as it expanded its territory, long before the republic was officially replaced by an empire.

Therefore, Montesquieu identified imperial expansion, rather than inequality and luxury, as the root cause of Rome's downfall. The lessons to be learnt from the example of Rome were clear: while many European monarchies were

<sup>4</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 60.

<sup>5</sup> For a full account of Ferguson's intellectual debt to Montesquieu, see Iain McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller and Harold S. Stone (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 126.

attempting to establish large overseas empires, Montesquieu warned in his *Reflections on Universal Monarchy in Europe* (large parts of which were reprinted in the *Spirit of the Laws*) against the dangers of military empire. Rather, he suggested that they should aim to integrate Europe's commercial states into a single peaceful commonwealth.

One footnote to Montesquieu's powerful critique of empire was his acknowledgement that the very notion of empire was shifting and ambiguous: a republic or a monarchy could be justified in expanding without risk to its internal politics if it had 'not yet reached the limits of its appropriate territorial rule'.<sup>8</sup> Another exception to his critique pertained to the types of empires that allied territorial conquest and commerce. The ancient example Montesquieu relied on in this case was the empire of Alexander the Great, which he envisioned as a potential 'model for modernity'.<sup>9</sup> What made Alexander's empire unique was his attempt to govern each country for its own interests, rather than for the interest of a central conquering city or state. He was the 'monarch of each nation,' and 'his first designs, were always to do something to increase [the conquered state's] prosperity and power.'<sup>10</sup> While 'the Romans conquered all in order to destroy all, [Alexander] wanted to conquer all in order to preserve all.'<sup>11</sup> This also implied, as shown by Michael Mosher, that Alexander was building an 'empire of plural cultures.' Because Alexander 'understood that living in accord with one's own mores, customs, and laws, and being a member of the collective esprit thereby established, was a priority for everyone,' Montesquieu asserted that the preservation of an empire made up of conquered nations necessitated, as much as possible, a re-creation within each individual nation of 'their own feeling of solidarity across the boundary between conquerors and conquered.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Mosher, 'Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment' in Sankar Muthu (ed.), *Empire and Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 112–54. For a discussion of Montesquieu's ambiguous praise of commercial and federal empires, see Catherine Larrère, 'L'empire, Entre Fédération et République', *Revue Montesquieu*, 8 (2006), 111–36. On the relationship between empire and despotism, see Sharon Krause, 'Despotism in the Spirit of Laws' in David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (eds), *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on The Spirit of Laws* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, n.d.), 231–71.

<sup>9</sup> Mosher, 'Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment', 139.

<sup>10</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 150–1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>12</sup> Mosher, 'Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment', 140. See also Catherine Volpillac-Augier, 'Montesquieu et L'impérialisme Grec' in David Carrithers and Patrick Coleman (eds), *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), 49–60.

Alexander's ambition 'to conquer all in order to preserve all,' Montesquieu argued, could constitute a template for modern eighteenth-century empires that would bring together military conquest and commercial exchanges. The modern empires of Holland and England were examples of such empires of trade: If England had been best able to combine commerce and liberty, it was because it had 'always made its political interests give way to the interests of its commerce.' Although Montesquieu was very much aware that commerce and war often went hand in hand, and that even the English and the Dutch were subject to 'jealousy of trade,' their mercantilist models remained clearly superior to the aggressive empires of the Portuguese and Spanish.<sup>13</sup> Their use of private trading companies allowed them to tone down the military nature of conquest, and to rule the conquered nation in a less overtly coercive manner. Montesquieu therefore preferred to refer to these modern empires as 'federations,' rather than 'empires.'<sup>14</sup> He described them as 'empires of the sea,' recalling the memory of Carthage instead of the ancient continental empires of Rome and Persia.<sup>15</sup> The clearest candidate to revive such models in the modern world was Britain, thanks to the trade links it had established with its American colonies.

The modern heir to Carthage and Athens, Britain resembled federative republics more than ancient empires.<sup>16</sup> Montesquieu hoped that federal structures could be combined with the commercial nature of modern empires, in ways that would allow them to remain coherent states while displaying the diversity of human cultures. In such scenarios, it might be possible to avoid the fate of political despotism that awaited all traditional empires. This was especially true in the case of England's civilised monarchy, whose 'representative

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<sup>13</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 342–3.

<sup>14</sup> On Montesquieu and federative empires (especially as they relate to federal republics) see Larrère, 'L'empire, Entre Fédération et République', 116–23. This could also be applied to the modern commercial version of Europe's continental universal monarchy, which he saw as a federation gathering 'one nation' brought together by trade links: 'Europe is no longer but one nation composed of several; France and England having need of the riches of Poland and Moscow just as one of their provinces has need of the others: the state which believes it can enhance its own power by the ruin of one that borders it ordinarily weakens itself along with its neighbor.' Quoted and translated by Michael Mosher in Mosher, 'Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment', 151. Charles de Montesquieu, *Réflexions Sur La Monarchie Universelle En Europe*, Michel Porret (ed.) (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2000), 105.

<sup>15</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 378.

<sup>16</sup> Mosher, 'Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment', 145. For a slightly different take on Montesquieu's view of Britain's 'empire of the seas', see Larrère, 'L'empire, Entre Fédération et République', 128–9.

institutions and separation of powers enhanced the competition between the factions that sought to control the state,' thus preserving the liberties of its subjects<sup>17</sup>

Because federate trading sea empires brought together worldwide networks within a single state, Montesquieu hoped they could become modern, positive versions of the empires that had risen and fallen throughout pre-modern history. Yet he still warned of potential pitfalls. Primarily, such commercial unions remained threatened by the pride and militaristic tendencies of monarchies. The English, in particular, were prone to displaying an arrogant sense of superiority – '[a] naval empire has always given to the peoples who have possessed it a natural pride, because, feeling themselves able to insult others everywhere, they believe that their power is as boundless as the ocean.'<sup>18</sup> This was a warning fully heeded by Ferguson.

Ferguson openly acknowledged the paramount influence of Montesquieu on his *Essay*, famously writing that when he '[recollected] what the President Montesquieu [had] written, [he was] at a loss to tell, why [he] should treat of human affairs.'<sup>19</sup> Following Montesquieu's account of the fall of the Roman Republic, he identified the Republic's aggressive expansion as the original source of corruption that had gradually eroded the martial and political virtue of the Roman citizens, allowing for the rise of populist military leaders and eventually the fall of the Republic into despotism. The basic problem faced by expanding nations, Ferguson argued, was that the very source of the virtue on which their military success was based was the existence of rivals:

The emulation of nations proceeds from their division. A cluster of states, like a company of men, find the exercise of their reason, and the test of their virtues, in the affairs they transact, upon a foot of equality, and of separate interest ... Athens was necessary to Sparta in the exercise of her virtue, as steel is to flint in the production of fire<sup>20</sup>

Thus free nations, wishing to establish their force and security, seek to enlarge their territory, yet 'this measure ... seldom fails to frustrate itself.'<sup>21</sup> The efficient administration of large empires requires constant displays of military force and the exercise of dictatorial powers, which ultimately erode liberty.

<sup>17</sup> Mosher, 'Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment', 152.

<sup>18</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 329.

<sup>19</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

In a prosperous and national country, the circumstance most likely to lead to the establishment of despotism is 'the perpetual enlargement of territory,' and 'from the history of mankind, to conquer, or to be conquered, has appeared, in effect, the same.'<sup>22</sup>

However, like Montesquieu, Ferguson distinguished between traditional despotic empires, and federal unions in which the smaller nations attached could retain enough independence to help counteract the corrupting effects of empire, and 'constitute a reservoir of virtue.'<sup>23</sup> This distinction was buttressed by Ferguson's idealized assessment of the simple but virtuous and martial Scottish Highlands, first formed during his travels to continental Europe in the 1740s. Shortly after the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, he wrote to a friend:

If I had not been in the Highlands of Scotland, I might be of their mind who think the inhabitants of Paris and Versailles the only polite people in the world. It is truly wonderful to see persons of every sex and age, who never travelled beyond the nearest mountain, possess themselves perfectly, perform acts of kindness with an aspect of dignity, and a perfect discernment of what is proper to oblige. This is seldom to be seen in our cities, or in our capital; but a person among the mountains, who thinks himself nobly born, considers courtesy as the test of his rank. He never saw a superior, and does not know what it is to be embarrassed.<sup>24</sup>

The contrast between Scotland's virtuous Highlands and the refined commercial world he encountered in his time as chaplain of the Black Watch regiment shaped Ferguson's assessment of the world he lived in. In the *Essay* he subsequently drew a sharp contrast between the military virtue that characterized rude societies, and the effeminacy and civic corruption that threatened eighteenth-century Europe. Decades later, the same idealized assessment of the Scottish Highlands was still reflected in his posthumous essay *Excursion in the Highlands*.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>23</sup> Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland', 137.

<sup>24</sup> Undated, to [unidentified] in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 128–9.

<sup>25</sup> Adam Ferguson, 'An Excursion in the Highlands: Discourse on Various Subjects' in Vincenzo Merolle (ed.), *The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), 47–70. See Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland', 137.

On the basis of Ferguson's lifelong admiration for the military virtue of Scottish Highlanders, Michael Kugler suggests that the imperial models derived from ancient Greek and Roman federative unions could in his view 'ensure strength against national enemies, while maintaining enough regional, ethnic and cultural distinctiveness to limit imperial despotism and to energize local civic conviction'.<sup>26</sup> In this perspective, Kugler continues, Ferguson could interpret Britain as a 'justly constructed union' gathering distinct regional communities.<sup>27</sup> While these communities ran the risk of losing their cultural distinctiveness in the context of ever-widening commercial and intellectual exchanges, Ferguson hoped that military training and participation (especially in the form of the militias he campaigned for in Scotland) could help sustain the military and civic virtue necessary to 'hold off the moral decay endemic to a great commercial empire like Britain's'.<sup>28</sup>

### Britain as a Federal Kingdom: The American Revolution

It is in this framework that the American Revolution was analysed by Ferguson.<sup>29</sup> The relationship of Britain with its American colonies, in his view, was not an example of 'the subjection of one state to another.' Such a situation, he agreed, would be 'inexpedient, and often calamitous for both.'<sup>30</sup> The British Empire was better analysed as a federal kingdom:

[Price] attempts a distinction between the separation of parts in the same kingdom, and the separation of parts in the same empire, which I confess I cannot comprehend; but if he lays so great a stress on the difference of names, he may be told, that Great Britain and its dependencies is not an Empire, but a kingdom.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland', 136.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 137. On the contemporary Scottish militia debates, see John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd, 1985).

<sup>29</sup> On Ferguson and the American Revolution, see Ronald Hamowy, 'Two Whig Views of the American Revolution: Adam Ferguson's Response to Richard Price', *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 31 (2003), 3–35; Yasuo Amoh, 'Ferguson's Views on the American and French Revolutions' in Heath and Merolle (eds), *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, 73–86.

<sup>30</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Remarks on a Pamphlet Lately Published by Dr Price, Intituled, Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, ... In a Letter from a Gentleman in the Country to a Member of Parliament*. (London: T. Cadell, 1776), 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 22.

While ostensibly merely playing with nomenclature, Ferguson was here echoing Montesquieu's positive account of Alexander's 'modern' empire, conceived of as one state gathering many nations and built for benefit of the whole, not just of the conquerors. This was even truer in the case of Britain, because – contrary to Alexander's rule – it also shared the benefits of British liberty with its dependencies.<sup>32</sup> Considering Britain as one single, large federal state, rather than as an empire, was not a mere nominal distinction. In this model, liberty could still be enjoyed in a large state, because Britain's American dependency, '[even at] the distance of three thousand miles of sea, may enjoy its freedom by sending substitutes or representatives to the Parliament of Great Britain.'<sup>33</sup> England could thus be considered as 'one member of the same state [Great Britain], who had always made common cause with another [America].' Accordingly, England had 'a very just claim to expect a joint contribution to the common support.'<sup>34</sup>

On the basis of his analysis of Ferguson's lectures in the late 1770s, David Kettler has posited that Ferguson's experience as a negotiator during the American Revolution softened his long-held convictions against Empire.<sup>35</sup> However, as has just been argued, another possibility is that Ferguson simply interpreted the specific case of Britain's American colonies as an example of the modern 'federative' empires praised by Montesquieu. In this way of framing the issue, Ferguson could adhere to a notion of empire that was indeed not antithetical to free constitutional government. He could also continue to warn his contemporaries against the temptation of aggressive militarism while entertaining the hope that Britain could maintain a non-despotic federal empire of the seas.

Unfortunately, Britain's American citizens refused to follow Ferguson's carefully constructed narrative of a large federal state, thus forcing him to reconsider his optimistic diagnosis of the British Empire. The behaviour of the colonists did seem to highlight the issues traditionally associated with large territories: in particular, the fact that distance eroded the citizens' respect for the balance of rights and duties that linked them to the state. Ferguson was outraged at the

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<sup>32</sup> This also echoed another of Montesquieu's counter-arguments in his discussion of empire, regarding 'military intervention ... on grounds of a duty to promote enlightenment', concerning the spread of enlightenment, on the same lines as the 'imperialist liberals' identified in Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). See also Mosher, 'Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment', 134.

<sup>33</sup> Ferguson, *Remarks*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland', 139.

sense of entitlement displayed by the Americans, who in his view refused to contribute to the expense of the state in proportion to 'the blood and treasure we have expanded in the common cause.'<sup>36</sup> The law of nature, he granted, did not 'bind the Americans to contribute to the supply of the British Empire, unless it [could] be shewn that they have received all the benefit of subjects; and therefore have stipulated to perform all the duties of subjects, by the same tacit convention that binds every inhabitant of Great Britain.'<sup>37</sup> While the Americans may have been justified in requesting a fairer balance between their duties and rights as citizens, they were not justified in rebelling and should instead '[apply] to the state' for amendments that would be enacted '[with] the consent of Parliament and their own.'<sup>38</sup>

As the American war highlighted the corruption of citizen feelings in Britain's far-away imperial subjects, it also made it clear to Ferguson that Britain needed a unified empire in order to fight off its rivals and survive in the modern globalised commercial world. Ferguson continued to wish for the autonomy of small nations, whether independent or in the context of a federal empire, but by the late 1770s he acknowledged that in the latter case their autonomy had to be limited by the overarching interests of the state: arguing in favour of union with Ireland in 1800 he wrote that 'my predilection is in favour of Small States & Separate Legislatures but I would carry this no farther with respect to the States I love than is consistent with their Safety.'<sup>39</sup> The survival and safety of the national unit remained, as always with Ferguson, paramount. After a series of global wars had set Great Britain against a number of European powers, including Spain, Sweden and particularly France throughout the eighteenth century, Ferguson believed that a unified empire was necessary to the military defense of Britain. Thus:

It appears to me that as our Rivals in Europe have been advancing the Union of Great Britain First & next that of the British Islands will be necessary to consolidate the Strength with which we are to withstand them. I therefore consider the Union with Ireland as the first great Political Event which some well improved conjuncture may bring about, & which will give us all our Boats aboard to make us tight for any Storm that may Assail us.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ferguson, *Remarks*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Ferguson to William Eden, 2 January 1780 in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, I: 230.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 230–1.

### **The French Revolution and Britain's Empire of the Seas**

The impact of the French Revolution on Ferguson's life and thought was indisputably momentous. The sweeping victories of the French armies, some have argued, shook Ferguson's love of Roman virtue and 'created a deep kind of confusion,' because he had spent his life arguing that the study of the Greeks and Romans was a 'school of virtue,' and that ancient military spirit was to be admired and imitated rather than feared.<sup>41</sup> To the contrary, as Ferguson closely observed the progress of French armies in the last twenty years of his life, he was in fact not confused. He had always ascribed the corruption that had destroyed Roman republicanism to its empire, and consistently warned against ambitions of territorial expansion and the dangers of aggressive imperialism. Therefore, in the confrontation that set France's republican military spirit against Britain's polite, commercial society, Ferguson was firmly on Britain's side. Britain's current erosion of citizen virtue, he begrudgingly accepted, remained preferable to corrupted republicanism leading to military expansionism and empire. This did not stop him, however, from hoping that Britain's leaders would learn something from their enemy's success, and strive to re-inject some military virtue into their own citizens.

Ferguson's interest in the Roman citizen-based military and his critical perspective on Roman history certainly afforded him effective instruments to analyse the French Revolution. He thus identified French military spirit, and more specifically the newly democratic French army, as the crux of the issue: they embodied the rebirth of ancient patriotism. Ferguson pointed to the intrinsic novelty of such ancient republican, military national spirit in the context of the modern world, as well as to its potentially devastating power. Crucially, he also sensed that the resulting army must completely overthrow the system of European relations as it has been known for centuries, and that the old 'balancing system' in which kings hired armies and fought for limited gain would be replaced by nations seeking to gain universal dominion. As he saw France repeat the errors of Rome, he was certainly saddened, but he was neither confused nor surprised. His commentary on Britain during the war shows that his love of virtue was far from shaken by the French threat, quite the contrary: he came to see the war against France as an opportunity to develop the ancient military virtues that had been eroded by Britain's commercial and imperial ventures.

In particular, the rumours of invasion in 1798 clearly invigorated him, by giving him hope that the threat to national integrity (which had so efficiently

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<sup>41</sup> Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland', 141.

reactivated French military virtue in 1793) would provide an equally potent antidote to commercial corruption in Britain. 'The Threats of the Directory serve the National cause in this Island,' he wrote. 'They will teach & drive as I trust to assume a just Military Posture which no effort of theirs will reverse.'<sup>42</sup> Though Ferguson feared the invasion, he was also oddly comforted by its prospect: the French, he trusted, '[could not] subdue this Armed nation.'<sup>43</sup> The threat of invasion had fostered a 'most prosperous state' in the nation: 'That is to say we have Men Arms & Spirit.' Clearly Ferguson interpreted this as a victory of a new martial spirit over the individualistic, utilitarian outlook of modern commercial men: 'if we should come to have less wealth [as a consequence of the war] we must consume the less either by having fewer mouths or putting less in them.'<sup>44</sup> He also wrote with renewed enthusiasm of militias and volunteers, advising his own son to enrol in the new Scottish militia (established in 1797) 'to set an Example to my neighbour Farmers in cheerfully giving up [his] name to the Ballot,' and asserting the following year that 'in these times every man must be military whatever else he may be.'<sup>45</sup> In the martial and heroic vein inspired by the threat of Napoleon, Ferguson claimed in 1799 that 'if we are not victorious, in my mind happy is he who falls.'<sup>46</sup>

In 1802, Ferguson's martial enthusiasm was somewhat dampened by the announcement of peace with France. This, he feared, would cancel the progress of citizen military virtues in Britain. At this time he was asked by Henry Dundas to comment on the new militia scheme he was introducing.<sup>47</sup> Responding to

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<sup>42</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, May 1798 in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 433.

<sup>43</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, July 1798 in *ibid.*, II: 440.

<sup>44</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, August 1798 in *ibid.*, II: 442.

<sup>45</sup> Ferguson to Alexander Carlyle, October 1797 in *ibid.*, II: 442, 423; Ferguson to Alexander Carlyle, December 1798 in *ibid.*, II: 446.

<sup>46</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, March 1799, in *ibid.*, II: 453.

<sup>47</sup> Dundas was one of Ferguson's former students. His name was recorded in 1776 as a member of the Poker Club, and he had been singled out by Ferguson at the outset of his law career as a promising young man. Dundas consulted Ferguson on the topic of militias in 1802. He had encouraged, in 1798, the creation of volunteer corps. Henry Dundas, 'Circular Letter Addressed to the Lord Lieutenants of the All the Maritime Counties of the Kingdom' in *New Annual Register*, G. G. and J. Robinson (London, 1799), 215–23. On 7 October 1810 Ferguson was still advising Dundas on the best method of defence against the Continent. As a prominent Tory politician and Pitt's secretary of war from 1794 to 1801, Dundas then wielded his considerable political influence in several instances to protect and further the career of the Edinburgh Moderates (including, through Alexander Carlyle, the career of Dugald Stewart's great friend Archibald Alison), and of Ferguson's relatives. Alexander Carlyle, *Autobiography of the Rev. Dr Alexander Carlyle, Minister of Inveresk* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 540.

the request, Ferguson, then in his late seventies, repeated that the question of militias was not one of abstract theoretical interest, but rather an immediate, practical concern:

You know that I glory in the Volunteer Corps of Great Britain and Ireland not as adepts in the mysteries of War & Military Tactics but as a Specimen of what the Country may expect in time of need ... the Peace might not be allowed to extinguish that Fire of which the War had struck out such Sparks.<sup>48</sup>

The recent peace, he advised, should only be considered 'as a long Truce and a time of preparation for War. Such are human Affairs.'<sup>49</sup> Military vigilance should be maintained, and the martial virtues of the people (the true 'garrison' of the island) still developed.<sup>50</sup>

Ferguson was encouraged in his aim by the notion that France would find it difficult to maintain her military spirit in times of peace, thus affording Britain some space to level the playing field.<sup>51</sup> These suspicions were confirmed by news of the new French constitution, which he believed would not durably establish the country's military spirit: 'military spirit [he does] not believe is yet the Ruling Passion in France.' It had arisen organically from a feeling of national unity against the threat of destruction, but with this threat gone, such a spirit could not be artificially maintained by law. The new Constitution, as it awkwardly tried to establish itself by compulsion, could only fail (it is '[nothing] more than a projected Contre Dance in which Couples are made to Stand up without a fiddle to put them in motion').<sup>52</sup>

The loss of military spirit Ferguson foresaw in France represented an opportunity for Britain: if Britain's leaders could reflect on the causes of their previous difficulties, and learn from their formidable neighbour, they could still improve, and prevail in future confrontations. In a second letter to Dundas (August 1802), Ferguson worded his case in a new way, insisting on 'national spirit' rather than on military virtue. 'It was not the use of Arms,' he argued, 'but the National Spirit that has of late decided the Fortune of Europe.'<sup>53</sup> He pursued this line in his next letter, which advocated a system similar to that of

<sup>48</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, January 1802 in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 472.

<sup>49</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, January 1802 in *ibid.*, II: 472.

<sup>50</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, January 1802 in *ibid.*, II: 472–4.

<sup>51</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, August 1802 in *ibid.*, II: 480.

<sup>52</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, August 1802 in *ibid.*, II: 482.

<sup>53</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, January 1802 in *ibid.*, II: 477.

the *Légion d'honneur* in France. Britain, he thought, must encourage the sentiment of national unity that had proved so powerful in the revolutionary wars – first in the French army, and second amongst British troops. Military skills, disciplines, even numbers were not the decisive factors in warfare anymore; the essential weapon had become the elevated national feelings first displayed by the French. If Britain wanted to prevail in any future confrontation, it had to imitate and encourage this national spirit in its own troops:

[T]he Legion of Honour is a Spur to Emulation in every Rank. May we not hope that after witnessing the Effects of National Spirit in our Forces abroad & our Volunteers at home, while mere discipline every where else gave way to the fury of a revolutionary madness, that much may be done to show our sense of this Spirit & contribute to foster & Preserve it. I am not partial to former times, or disposed to ascribe the Virtues of men to Ignorance & Poverty: but rather believe that Ranks well employed are favourable to Virtue and Elevation of mind ... but I wish if Possible to have something devised in the way of that Institution I have mentioned to Penetrate the Souls of men with Sentiments of Elevation & Honour.<sup>54</sup>

This practical suggestion to Dundas illustrates a constant feature of Ferguson's writings. Far from placing the value of philosophy in the ideal of truth, or contemplation (in that sense, his reputation as a stoic was undeserved), Ferguson always considered that its value lay in its pedagogical function – in its ability to inform the minds of students and rulers alike. In the last years of his life he was still acting upon this conviction and putting his authority at the service of the British authorities, as he attempted to convince Dundas that encouraging and nurturing Britain's national spirit was the only defence possible against France's new (yet old) brand of warfare. The conclusion to be drawn from the French revolutionary wars, at least in Ferguson's mind, was that such an invigoration of the national spirit must involve a redefinition of modern patriotism that would be linked to the national army and military spirit.

In suggesting that the British monarchy encourage patriotic, national feelings in its soldiers, Ferguson was building upon a Harringtonian and neo-Harringtonian discourse. This discourse presupposed the idea that military success would reward those modern armies which managed to harness the

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<sup>54</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, August 1802 in *ibid.*, II: 481.

ancient patriotism of the Romans.<sup>55</sup> France, in Ferguson's view, had returned almost directly to the corrupted military despotism of the early Empire. In order to prevail over its armies' enthusiasm, he believed Britain would have to become the first modern country to revive ancient patriotism while maintaining modern conditions of civil liberty, commerce, and prosperity within its empire. Ferguson was clearly an acute observer of his own society. He offered, in fact, an early analysis of mechanisms that informed the valorisation of military life and patriotic virtue which Linda Colley has described in the period.<sup>56</sup>

The war against France, Ferguson argued, represented a chance for Britain to reform its citizens and strike a better balance between the benefits of global commerce and the necessity of a citizen-led national defence. He refused to believe that the development of industry and commerce were incompatible with the citizen virtue necessary to national defence. In his words, 'No Nation Surely ever exhibited a better Spirit than Britain has done in the height of its affluence ... The Manufacturer I trust will not be less qualified to ply his Loom because he is conscious that no Enemy will dare to invade his family or his Property.'<sup>57</sup> In spite of his reputation as a backwards-looking classical republican, Ferguson certainly believed that a large commercial empire that attempted to nurture the virtue of its citizens was the better option, when compared to a corrupted republic whose strong military spirit was applied to expansion. His biggest fear was the construction of a new despotic empire that would ensure the final corruption and downfall of European society, and it was Napoleon who seemed most likely to realize it.

Yet Ferguson, as he was observing the wars against France in the 1790s, and then in the 1800s, was confronted by something he perceived as a major issue. In its fight against France, Britain came to rely increasingly on her own maritime and commercial power. In response to the French threat of territorial expansion, Britain developed her own, distinct imperialist model and ambitions – and the remedy, Ferguson feared, risked becoming worse than the disease.

In Ferguson's view the revolutionary wars highlighted two interconnected issues: virtue in Britain's domestic sphere, and the country's foreign policy.

<sup>55</sup> Istvan Hont, 'The Permanent Crisis of a Divided Mankind: 'Nation-State' and 'Nationalism' in Historical Perspective', in Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 520.

<sup>56</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nations, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 183–93.

<sup>57</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, August 1802 in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 481.

Ferguson repeatedly lamented Britain's inability to recognise the real stakes of international policy and the subsequent lack of steady guiding principles in its behaviour. This he denounced in 1795:

I have sometimes asked Jn Bull how he would like to have Spain lay hold of the Lands End, and pretend to give law in the British & Irish Channels. But Jn thinks that Other Nations should give way to him. He is insulated and at one time thinks he should care for nobody, at another time that every body should be governed by him & never at all knows how to behave himself to Other Nations.<sup>58</sup>

In 1796, Ferguson similarly lamented the short-sightedness of Britain's national jealousy, concluding: 'I can only repeat what I have formerly said that [John Bull] never knows how to behave himself to Other Nations.'<sup>59</sup> The issue was that Britain's foreign policy was not governed with the aim of conserving the nation's virtue and safety, but rather by an unhealthy form of commercial and territorial jealousy. This led Britain to vary wildly in its policy according to her short-term needs: 'at one time [John Bull] would govern every body, at another he cares for nobody'.<sup>60</sup> This represented a problem, not for abstract moral reasons, but for very immediate questions of national defence.

Indeed, Britain's jealous greed was coming back to haunt the Crown – especially now that Britain found itself in dire need of its neighbours' support. No one, Ferguson believed, would trust or help a nation known for looking only to increase its territory and wealth.<sup>61</sup> It was therefore vital that Britain should convince its neighbours that it was absolutely not looking to exploit the war for its own imperialist purposes:

If we have given Other nations occasion to think that we mean or meant our own aggrandisement, it is full time to undeceive them by the most Sincere declarations, that we withdrew from the Continent because we could promote the common Cause more effectually elsewhere. That we meant no acquisition: but in the way of pledge for the rights of our Allies

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<sup>58</sup> Ferguson to James Edgar (?), September 1795 in *ibid.*, II: 372. It is worth noting that Ferguson's criticism of England's foreign policy tends to be levelled at 'John Bull' – a figure that symbolised a particularly English version of Britain. Tamara L. Hunt, *Defining John Bull: Political Caricature and National Identity in Late Georgian England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 144.

<sup>59</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, June 1796 in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 397.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, June 1796 in *ibid.*, II: 397.

as well as our own & there is no conquest but we are willing to relinquish for a proper Adjustment in the common Cause of Safety to the Nations of Europe.<sup>62</sup>

The only way to win the war, Ferguson believed, was to put an end to the (largely justified) mutual distrust displayed by the European nations against Britain. Britain must cease to plot for commercial or territorial aggrandisement, and focus on preserving its national integrity. In the current context, this could only be achieved through cooperation: 'there is no Safety now but in the Strict union & Concert of Nations whether in Peace or War.'<sup>63</sup>

As David Hume and Adam Smith had in the mid-eighteenth century, Ferguson pointed to the (now very real) destructive tendencies of unhealthy national jealousy for modern commercial nations. His commentary was, however, formulated in a distinctly neo-republican language as he denounced Britain's imperialist ambitions in a critique that targeted both the country's territorial ambitions and her trading empire. As previously argued, he had supported earlier a federalist view of empire that allowed for semi-autonomous peripheral regions. In this vision, the 'virtuous provinces' at the fringes of the empire, whose distinct legal, religious and educational institutions ensured a continued national tradition, and of which the Scottish highlands culture was the prime example, 'could act as a reservoir of virtue against the moral decay inherent in modern commercial society and empire in general'.<sup>64</sup> While the American Revolution had underlined afresh the corrupting potential of empire on its citizens, and the danger of self-serving demands from peripheries at the expense of the greater good, it had also reaffirmed the importance of maintaining a united imperial front in a hostile international environment. A confederacy of provinces simply could not provide the same quality of national defence as a strong, united empire. In the context of France's renewed territorial ambitions bolstered by republican enthusiasm in the 1790s, Ferguson came to consider the idea of empire as a necessary evil. Evil because a corrupting influence, hurtful to the national spirit so essential to virtuous patriotism, but necessary because in the modern world, national defence, and national survival, required extension and unity.<sup>65</sup> While acknowledging

<sup>62</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, June 1796 in *ibid.*, II: 397.

<sup>63</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, June 1796 in *ibid.*, II: 397.

<sup>64</sup> Kugler, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland', 137.

<sup>65</sup> This opinion is clearly laid out in 1780, as Ferguson was writing to William Eden, his former superior in the failed diplomatic peace commission to Philadelphia, recently named Chief Secretary for Ireland. See Ferguson, *Correspondence*, I: 230-1.

the necessity to rely on Britain's navy in the war against France, Ferguson also deplored that it must come at the expense of land- and citizen-based defence, although repeated invasion scares gave him hope that both could be conjoined.

Most importantly, Ferguson now strongly disapproved, in principle, of England's ambition to 'rule the waves,' which he deemed no better than France's ambition of continental despotism.<sup>66</sup> In 1798, he wrote:

We complain that the French would be a Conquering & the great Nation by Land: but our publick Scribblers at least are as Offensive in their turn by Sea. Is not rule Britania ov[e]r the Waves as bad as ça ira ... It is piteous to hear fools talk of the Sovere[i]gnty of the Seas while they own that there should be no Sovereign of the Land beyond his own territory.<sup>67</sup>

By the late 1790s, Ferguson had clearly become despondent about the possibility of establishing the peaceful commercial 'federations' Montesquieu had advocated. Rather, he had come to agree with an idea developed in the late seventeenth century by English thinkers in response to the Dutch trading empire. This idea – which was pervasive in eighteenth-century France (before it was famously reformulated by the Comte Hauterive in 1800) – held that naval empires were merely a new incarnation of the old ambition of universal dominion, and not in any way less corrupting than continental ambitions of territorial enlargement.<sup>68</sup> A specifically Scottish reformulation of the idea had been that of Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun (the uncle of Ferguson's patron and lifelong friend, Lord Milton). Fletcher had warned against the threat of maritime universal empire in his *Discourse Concerning the Affairs of Spain* (1698) and his *Speech upon the State of the Nation* (1701), and accused the European sovereigns of wanting to 'for ever establish in themselves the empire of the sea, with an entire monopoly of trade.' He saw this as the modern incarnation of older ideas of universal dominion, with all their threats of corruption and despotism.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, October 1779 in *ibid.*, I: 221.

<sup>67</sup> Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, May 1798 in *ibid.*, II: 433.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Pincus, 'The English Debate over Universal Monarchy' in John Robertson (ed.), *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41–2.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Fletcher, 'A Speech upon the State of the Nation; in April 1701' in John Robertson (ed.), *Andrew Fletcher: Political Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 128. Andrew Fletcher, 'A Discourse Concerning the Affairs of Spain: Written in the Month of July, 1698,' in *ibid.*, 116–17. On Fletcher support for a

Ferguson's reasoning was now directly in the line of Fletcher, as he repeatedly voiced concerns about England's ambition to 'rule the waves,' especially between 1797 and 1802.<sup>70</sup> International trade, for him, certainly remained a positive thing – but only in as much as it did not weaken Britain's military virtue, or endanger her national independence. Ferguson had voiced a similar opinion as early as 1772, when he was reflecting upon the nature of Britain's dominion in America: 'I dont wish to see this Countrey in Possession of many Provinces a Prey to Rapacity And perhaps an Engine to be turned against this Countrey itself.'<sup>71</sup> In the line of what Fletcher had wished for Scotland's Darien colony, he envisioned the British Empire as a free-trading emporium protected by the fleet instead of corrupting monopolies run by metropolitan-based merchants.

There was indeed danger in Britain's ambition of commercial dominion. Most immediate was the possibility of corruption for British citizens. Ferguson railed against Britain's pretention to rule the sea, pointing out to Henry Dundas that the sea was merely a means to an end, whether it be commercial or military.

Away with the absurd Fable, Sovereign of the Sea, which we sometimes so idly repeat. We and every Party on Earth to the extent of our force, have a right to impede Search & detain everything from going to an Ennemy, by which he might be enabled to annoy us. But the Sea is not a Subject of Properly Idle Pretensions to homage on.<sup>72</sup>

Britain's commercial empire was also becoming a threat to Britain's national independence: 'that Element [the sea] will sett the world against us, more than real usurpations at Land might do: for the first is galling to Thousands: the other only to a few Statesmen.'<sup>73</sup> Britain's trade empire was therefore counter-productive in the long run, making England appear like a despot of the seas to all its neighbours. Ferguson did not think Britain's international trade was worth this price: 'What is,' he asks in 1798, 'to become of trade,' if his negative view of Britain's maritime empire is justified? His answer 'still is let so much of it as is inconsistent with National Safety go elsewhere.' Compared to national spirit,

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Darien colony that would be 'an emporium without the costs of an empire', see John Robertson, 'Empire and Union: Two Concepts of the Early Modern European Political Order' in Robertson (ed.), *A Union for Empire*, 32; David Armitage, 'The Scottish Vision of Empire: Intellectual Origins of the Darien Venture' in *ibid.*, 105.

<sup>70</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, January 1802 in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 475.

<sup>71</sup> Ferguson to John MacPherson, 1772 [date unknown] in *ibid.*, I: 96.

<sup>72</sup> Ferguson to Henry Dundas, January 1802 in *ibid.*, II: 475.

<sup>73</sup> Ferguson, to Sir John MacPherson, May 1798 in *ibid.*, II: 433; *ibid.*, II: 475.

wealth is of lesser consequence, because 'A Valiant People & independent State cannot want for Resources.'<sup>74</sup>

As Ferguson was writing his *Of the French Revolution* in 1807, the war had become a contest between two empires: one territorial and continental, the other commercial and maritime. Ferguson's greatest fear was that Napoleon, if he subdued Britain, may extend his domination to both realms. This, for the first time in history, would create an empire that was both continental and maritime. There would be, he feared, no coming back from this catastrophe. The continental powers that had agreed to enact the embargo against Britain failed to grasp this danger: '[They] must be sensible that if the Ruler of France were as powerful at Sea as he is by Land, No state of Province could be safe from California to Japan ... if [his Empire] ever should be compleat their Properties & Persons will be at his discretion.'<sup>75</sup>

What was there to be done against this threat? The difficulty, for Ferguson, resided in the fact that Britain had to make full use of her naval strength to resist Napoleon (the best hope for resistance resides in her 'insular Situation & Naval defences'), yet resist the temptation of building a despotic empire of the seas of her own in the process: 'My only difficulty is to hit the just mean between the danger of Subjugation & the danger of wishing to Subjugate Others.'<sup>76</sup> This tendency of Britain's to denounce continental despotism while overlooking the despotic aspects of her own overseas policy had long worried Ferguson, but the post-1789 developments in Europe had turned this worry into vivid concern. As the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire pushed Britain to dial up her own imperialist rhetoric and ambitions in response, Ferguson feared for the future.<sup>77</sup> 'Britannia rules the waves' may have seemed a fair and obvious response to Napoleon's continental ambitions, but to Ferguson, it was no better. More importantly, it was highly dangerous for Britain in the long run.

Ferguson's commentary is significant, if only in comparison with Hauterive's contemporary presentation of England as fighting France's territorial ambitions in order to better assert her own maritime version of universal empire. It is important to recall that Hauterive's argument built upon the

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Adam Ferguson, 'Of the French Revolution, with Actual and Still Impending Consequences in Europe' in Adam Ferguson, *Collection of Essays*, Yasuo Amoh (ed.) (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co., 1996), 138.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. See also Ferguson to Sir John MacPherson, May 1798 in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 433.

<sup>77</sup> For his early comments on the American Revolution see Ferguson to John MacPherson, September 1772 in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, I: 95–6.

pre-revolutionary French idea that the Balance of Power now resided in commerce, and that Britain, not France, was therefore the most dangerous candidate to universal monarchy. This argument is typically understood as pioneering post-revolutionary analytical discussions of French foreign policy and European international relations.<sup>78</sup> The Gentz-Hauterive debate of 1800–01 supposedly represents a watershed moment in the political commentary of European relations, because both writers moved away from ideological accounts and arguments; instead framing their accounts in terms of state interest and Balance of Power. In the preceding years, however, Ferguson had already effected a similar shift by presenting much the same arguments. He had also moved beyond the dispute that set Hauterive's commercial understanding of universal empire against Gentz's more traditional territorial understanding of the same fear, by arguing that both represented distinct, and equally dangerous, possibilities. Before Hauterive, and certainly before the architects of the Congress of Vienna, Ferguson built upon the heritage of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy and Fletcherian republicanism to identify a weakness of the post-Napoleonic European order. While it was certainly an immediate priority to preserve the territorial balance of Europe against expansionist imperialism, he pointed out that other nations would eventually resent and start fighting England's global commercial imperialism. While this argument is usually associated with French writers, Ferguson's writings clearly display an alternative source for its formulation.<sup>79</sup>

Ferguson saw the future of Europe as a contest between two equally dangerous imperialist ambitions: the territorial imperialism of France, and the commercial imperialism of Britain. While Ferguson is traditionally portrayed as favouring ancient over modern societies, this dichotomy does not frame his position in the right terms: he believed that both models, in their own ways, carried strong potential for destructive empires. The war against France was a unique historical occurrence, because it set the two forms of corrupted (and corrupting) empires against each other. Ferguson's hope for a modern world that would see free trade established between independent, virtuous nations was threatened by Britain's victorious empire just as much as it had been by Napoleon's military spirit, even if the danger appeared less immediate. This was

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<sup>78</sup> Murray Forsyth, 'The Old European States-System: Gentz versus Hauterive', *Historical Journal* 23 (1980), 528.

<sup>79</sup> John Robertson also identifies a Humean source for this argument. John Robertson, 'Universal Monarchy and the Liberties of Europe: David Hume's Critique of an English Whig Doctrine' in Quentin Skinner and Nicholas Phillipson (eds), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 370.

not the position of a nostalgic republican keen to promote war over commerce: it was that of a sharp observer of contemporary events, who identified imperialism in all its forms as the primary threat to modern European society.

## Ferguson, Slavery and the Scottish Enlightenment's Argument for Opposing Abolition

Glen Doris

The question of Adam Ferguson and the issue of slavery, when asked at all, has often been answered by those who group him together with Adam Smith and his economic critique of the plantation slave system. This connection is made with reference to Ferguson's very brief critique of the philosophical foundation for the slave system contained within his work *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1769). The limited nature of his rather abstract statements on slavery has not stopped writers from placing Ferguson amidst the pantheon of abolitionist thinkers or accrediting the Scottish philosopher with 'impeccable anti-slavery credentials'.<sup>1</sup>

By early 1792 Britain's abolitionist activism was reaching its zenith. While historians have noted the unprecedented public participation in the political sphere as evidenced by the hundreds of thousands of petition signatories, they have been less observant of the remarkable absence of vocal or literary support by the philosophical elite.<sup>2</sup> While many literati of the high Scottish Enlightenment had died such as Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith, other influential writers were alive and active but strangely quiet on the subject that had captured the imagination of the rest of the nation. Adam Ferguson's retirement from teaching in 1785 did nothing to dampen his political engagement, yet the spry Scottish philosopher never responded in any direct way to the rising spirit of Abolitionism. Ferguson mentions nothing concerning the

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<sup>1</sup> John Bratton and David Denham, *Capitalism and Classical Social Theory: Second Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 58.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 230–31.

contemporary practice of slavery in any known letters<sup>3</sup> or unpublished essays,<sup>4</sup> a silence that makes his presumed partisanship with the antislavery cause more a matter of historical fancy than of evidence.

Despite the often quoted association with Smith's critiques of slavery, Adam Ferguson wrote very little on the subject aside from a brief discussion on the abstract principles of chattel slavery taken from his studies of Roman law, there being little legislation to address the phenomenon in Scottish law prior to Knight vs Wedderburn in 1778.<sup>5</sup> Ferguson addressed the various legitimizations for accepting slavery under Roman law and dismissed each one as invalid vis-à-vis the natural rights of man. These early thoughts were brief and to the point:

No one is born a slave; because every one is born with all his original rights.

No one can become a slave; because no one, from being a person, can, in the language of the Roman law, become a thing, or subject of property.

The supposed property of the master in the slave, therefore, is a matter of usurpation, not of right.<sup>6</sup>

In 1792 Ferguson's thoughts upon slavery were expanded in the new edition of his lecture material but the national controversy over the slave trade debates does not appear to have informed his view in any particular way. Rather, the Scottish professor remained detached from any real-world application. His discussion of the state of slavery is placed in the realm of political science under the headings 'Of the Specific Obligations and Rights that result from Contract' and 'Of Forfeiture, and the Species of Rights which result from it'. No mention is made of the existence of contemporary chattel slavery; nor does he remark on the rights of those who purchased the captives of other men's

<sup>3</sup> See Adam Ferguson, *The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson*, Vincenzo Merolle (ed.) (2 vols, London: Pickering and Chatto, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> See Adam Ferguson, *The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson*, Vincenzo Merolle (ed.) (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> This case, brought before the Scottish Court of Session, involved Joseph Knight, an enslaved man brought from the West Indies by his master John Wedderburn. Knight sought to marry a servant girl but was denied permission by Wedderburn who then tried to force Knight's repatriation to Jamaica. Knight sought a legal protection from the courts. The Court of Session decided in favour of Knight, arguing that slavery was not enforceable under Scottish law. Despite its landmark status, the decision did not rule on the legality of slavery in British territories.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1769), 222.

wars, a commonly offered rationale for the African slave trade.<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, at all times, remained aloof from the moral considerations of the economic trade in enslaved Africans, seeming to regard the general idea of slavery as a test case for the applicability of Roman law in eighteenth-century Scottish jurisprudence.

Ferguson's attitude to the theoretical idea of chattel slavery was couched in the language of historical examination. When contesting the impossibility of persons being bought and sold, he argued that

a slave, according to the definition adopted, where the institution of slavery took place, and agreeably to the practice of purchase and sale, established in the market for slaves, is considered a *thing*, and not a *person*. The supposition is impossible, and cannot be realised by the consent of any party, even relating to himself. He may consent to do what another commands, within the limits of possibility; but must continue to be a person, having original, if not acquired rights, and inspired by nature with a disposition to revolt, whenever he is galled with the sense of insufferable injury or wrong.<sup>8</sup>

Writing in the historical context of the Haitian Revolt, Ferguson had a relevant example of the personhood of the enslaved population of St Domingue asserting their natural disposition. Curiously then, the Edinburgh professor strictly adhered to theory, ignoring the political realities unfolding all around him.<sup>9</sup> For Ferguson to lecture and write on slavery purely in the abstract at the very time when the nation was petitioning to abolish the slave trade seems recalcitrant, on the one hand. On the other, his reticence is an example of the way in which the Scottish Enlightenment in general held both the slave trade and its critics at arm's length during the peak of Abolitionist campaigning. Ferguson was not opposed to utilizing his philosophy to bring about political ends when the cause was close

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<sup>7</sup> See for example James M. Adair, *Unanswerable Arguments Against the Abolition of the Slave Trade with a Defence of the Proprietors of the British Sugar Colonies, Against Certain Malignant Charges Contained in Letters Published by a Sailor, and by a Luffman, Newton, &c.* (London: James M. Adair, 1790), 144.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science; being Chiefly a Retrospect of Lectures Delivered in the College of Edinburgh* (2 vols, Edinburgh and London: A. Strahan, T. Cadell, and W. Creech, 1792), II: 243.

<sup>9</sup> The plantation slaves on the French colony of St Domingue began an uprising in 1791 under the leadership of François-Dominique Toussaint l'Ouverture that eventually resulted in the declaration of the independent nation of Haiti in 1804.

to his heart; however the absence of any discussion of African slavery clearly demonstrated the slave trade warranted no such involvement.<sup>10</sup>

### Political Slavery

Ferguson predominantly connected the idea of slavery to the political state of man rather than the condition of chattel slaves. In *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), it was the excess wealth and political laziness of contemporary society allowing the rise of a tyrannical government that was the true enslavement.<sup>11</sup> It is this state of political slavery that most concerned Ferguson, and his use of the word 'slave' almost always reflected the lot of the citizen deprived of political rights rather than the African bought and sold as property. His very definition of an enslaved person reflected this usage:

Where the citizen is supposed to have rights of property and of station, and is protected in the exercise of them, he is said to be free; and the very restraints by which he is hindered from the commission of crimes, are a part of his liberty. No person is free, where any person is suffered to do wrong with impunity. Even the despotic prince on his throne, is not an exception to this general rule. He himself is a slave, the moment he pretends that force should decide any contest. The disregard he throws on the rights of his people recoils on himself; and in the general uncertainty of all conditions, there is no tenure more precarious than his own.<sup>12</sup>

Ferguson saw slavery as a state of mind, a state that was created when political citizens abandoned the virtuous life of politics and embraced the base passions arising from their apathy. This state of political slavery, however, was the disaster which awakened the people to return to the life of virtue. At the end of the *Essay*, after his warnings of the potential for an apocalypse of corruption and despotism, Ferguson created his own version of the Biblical millennial kingdom – a return to the Eden of a virtuous commercial society. Fettered only by their minds, the enslaved, could attain freedom by the simple process of awakening.

Where there are no longer any profits to corrupt, or fears to deter, the

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<sup>10</sup> See for example Adam Ferguson, *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1756), 53.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 248.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 150–1.

charm of dominion is broken, and the naked slave, as awake from a dream, is astonished to find he is free. When the fence is destroyed, the wilds are open, and the herd breaks loose. The pasture of the cultivated field is no longer preferred to that of the desert. The sufferer willingly flies where the extortions of government cannot overtake him: where even the timid and the servile may recollect they are men; where the tyrant may threaten, but where he is known to be no more than a fellow creature: where he can take nothing but life, and even this at the hazard of his own.<sup>13</sup>

While Ferguson did not create the alternate idea of political slavery, his philosophical writing perpetuated it, adding confusion to late eighteenth-century discussion of real slavery. The enslaved person was not the labourer toiling under the whip, but in fact the master whose wealth and power enslaved him to criminal actions and brutality over those he ruled. Additionally, to the extent that governing authorities threatened his property, the master was vulnerable to being enslaved to a despotic government. The only way to prevent this enslavement of the propertied elite was to engage in the political process and fight to maintain his rights. While certainly inspiring passionate political argument, such a use of the term 'slavery' complicated and confused the Abolitionist case. It is no wonder that Charles James Fox, during the 1791 parliamentary debates on the slave trade, argued that such a definition of slavery was an affront to true justice:

One word more: never let this subject be confounded with any ideas of *Political* slavery ... What means Slavery? A Slave is one whom another man commands at his pleasure: who belongs not to himself, but to his master, at whose disposal he is in all respects; this is *personal* slavery. Political slavery is but a metaphor ... It has been named Political Slavery, with a view of exciting somewhat of that same horror against it, which Personal Slavery is known always to excite ... Never again, therefore, let our understandings be insulted by confounding two things so totally different.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 263.

<sup>14</sup> Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *A Debate on the Motion for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the House of Commons on Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791, Reported in Detail* (London: J. Phillips, 1792), 125.

For Ferguson, the lethargy that threatened political slavery had to be resisted energetically, but Fox's 'personal slavery' did not appear to concern him. He wrote no pamphlets warning of the dangers posed to freedom in the colonial slave laws, nor did he write letters extolling the virtues of the men and women championing the abolition of the slave trade in parliament. For such a prolific and eclectic political writer to have completely ignored such a touchstone issue, it might appear to the modern historian that the Scottish philosopher was not aware that the Abolitionist movement existed.

### History as a Paradigm for the Present

There is another way to explain the strange absence of written commentary from Ferguson (as well as most of the other literati alive at the time). The emerging belief that deliberate parliamentary reform was essential for the removal of slavery countered the philosophy of Ferguson, Smith and others who had long argued that modern civilization was the product of slow incremental moves toward goals unknown to the intelligence of any individual. Smith and his student John Millar discussed in their historical works the removal of Europe's indigenous slave state, villeinage. In the case of runaway James Somerset (1772), Lord Mansfield of the Kings Bench compared slavery to villeinage, a condition that he argued had ceased in England and could not be revived.<sup>15</sup> When the Scottish philosophers examined villeinage, they pointed to its gradual and voluntary abandonment in response to the forces of economics and self-interest. As land owners judged that they would better profit from the hiring of free tenant farmers, the practice of enslaving people gradually died out without the need for special legislation.<sup>16</sup> This association of enslaved Africans with European serfs gave the Scottish literati a paradigm for the removal of African chattel slavery that did not need legislative intervention. All it would take was time and the impersonal forces of contemporary self-interest for slavery to wither and die. Ending slavery was not a question of defeating evil, but of progressing socially beyond the need for it.

Ferguson believed that the creation of beneficial institutions and the disappearance of harmful ones happened over long periods of time without the need for radical upheavals or social reform. This social evolution, often referred to as the theory of spontaneous order, permeated Ferguson's published work and

<sup>15</sup> Lord Shaw of Dunfirmlane, 'The Enlightenment of Lord Mansfield', *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law, Third Series*, 8 (1926), 6.

<sup>16</sup> See Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael and P.G. Stein (eds) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 187–8 and John Millar, *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, (3rd edition; London: J. Murray, 1781), 322–3.

was the core theoretical schema for his understanding of history.<sup>17</sup> Ferguson saw man as an improver of his circumstances, with the caveat that man also remains prone to repeat the mistakes of the past. In a passage from the *Essay*, Ferguson describes the relentlessness, feverish character of humanity's technical progress:

We speak of art as distinguished from nature; but art itself is natural to man. He is in some measure the artificer of his own frame, as well as of his fortune, and is destined, from the first age of his being, to invent and contrive. He applies the same talents to a variety of purposes and acts nearly the same part in very different scenes. He would always be improving on his subject, and he carries this intention where-ever he moves, through the streets of the populous city, or the wilds of the forest. While he appears equally fitted to every condition, he is upon this account unable to settle in any. At once obstinate and fickle, he complains of innovations, and is never sated with novelty. He is perpetually busied in reformatations, and is continually wedded to his errors. If he dwell in a cave, he would improve it into a cottage; if he has already built, he would still build to a greater extent.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of Ferguson's litany of praise for man's busy, never sleeping dynamism in seeking change, a firm qualification is given; a coda added almost to dampen any perceived passion that the reader might imbibe. Continuing from his descriptions of man's turning a cave into a cottage and a cottage into a larger house, he says,

But he does not propose to make rapid and hasty transitions; his steps are progressive and slow; and his force, like the power of a spring, silently presses on every resistance; an effect is sometimes produced before the cause is perceived; and with all his talent for projects, his work is often accomplished before the plan is devised.<sup>19</sup>

Man makes progress, but it is not accomplished through great leaps, or by the efforts of superior people. His progress could not be viewed outside of the context of the society as a whole. This progress is inherently slow. Movement

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<sup>17</sup> Lisa Hill, *The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 101.

<sup>18</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

toward improvement as a whole society was incremental – with small steps taken over time that issued in changes that, at first, would not be particularly noticeable – although, in the long run, such gradual changes resulted in huge shifts. From the earliest improvements in hunting, to development in the fine arts, politics and technology, the upward path to civilization has been traversed over many generations.

### Conjectural History

Discovering evidence for this slow evolution of society was often not possible through the traditional method of historical investigation, as the writers of past records would not themselves have been aware of these glacial shifts. This led the Scots to develop what Dugald Stewart called ‘theoretical or conjectural history.’<sup>20</sup> Stewart’s explanation of this methodology reflected the desire of historians, such as Ferguson and Smith, to speculatively recreate history where knowledge of the facts was missing: ‘In examining the history of mankind, as well as in examining the phenomena of the material world, when we cannot trace the process by which an event *has been* produced, it is often of importance to be able to show how it *may have been* produced by natural causes.’<sup>21</sup>

It is important to reflect upon Stewart’s use of the word ‘natural’ in his depiction definition of conjectural history. Natural history was to be juxtaposed with ‘unusual’ or ‘exceptional’ and stood in opposition to the ‘miraculous’. Histories were written to explain the development of specific societies while recognising the universality of human nature. It tracked how this nature responded to circumstances that, while not specifically recorded, were general enough to make conjecture possible. While knowledge of the particulars of a culture or civilisation might be lost, their historical progress could be theorized under the common drive for personal and economic security. As each society strove for protection against enemies and to secure access to necessary resources, gradual progress would be made and each people would advance through what Ferguson, Smith and fellow historian John Millar agreed were distinct stages of development. This stadial and conjectural understanding of history allowed the writers to make reasoned statements about the past in the absence of any direct factual data. As all humans shared psychological and physiological traits, one could use reason to postulate how a particular society probably developed.

<sup>20</sup> Dugald Stewart, ‘Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith LL.D.’ in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects by the Late Adam Smith, LL.D.* (Basil: James Decker, 1799), xlvii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xlvi.

Ferguson's *Essay* adhered to this methodology of conjectural history. The paths by which societies progressed through the various stages were not specific, nor were they attributable to any particular inspired individual's leadership. Ferguson was generally averse to attributing any of the positive characteristics of society to great men. On the contrary, causes were general, linked to the basic requirements of all humanity. The difference between the speed of advancement was caused by the accidents of place and circumstance that acted upon these general causes.<sup>22</sup>

### Spontaneous Order

The scepticism towards the history of great men embedded within conjectural history was also evinced by Ferguson in his treatment of great innovations and rapid societal transformations. It was unlikely that changes to social structures were the result of personal schemes; rather, they were brought about by slow, incremental social progress. The consequence of this scepticism was to downplay the 'modern' man's superior reasoning over the ancient, in favour of emphasising the immense intricacy of modern social institutions, a complexity that defied the simplistic explanations of the great warriors and statesmen. For Ferguson, the social institutions were primarily political: forms of government, policy and the execution of civic and legal functions. He reasoned that the success of such institutions in contemporary Europe was not attributable to wise planning. His argument was not that great things do not happen, but that they happen without any deliberate intention for the particular outcome enjoyed. Every outcome that brought a society to greatness was the result of a myriad of small, anonymous decisions that combined like sediments to build up the banks that changed the direction of history. Such small changes were made without any view to the distant object of reform, but were instead the demands of immediacy and self-interest. Out of the almost infinite complexity that arose from the gradual exercise of these short-term decisions, long-term beneficial consequences arose, the likes of which were beyond the imagination of those who worked toward enacting them.<sup>23</sup>

Ferguson attributed the greatness of such civilizations as those in Europe to its 'genius' or its 'spirit of national independence'.<sup>24</sup> It was erroneous to claim that it was the plans of great men that resulted in a great nation; progress was

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<sup>22</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 109–10.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

impersonal and unthinking. In discussing the origins of political establishments Ferguson stated:

Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design. If Cromwell said, That a man never mounts higher than when he knows not whither he is going; it may with more reason be affirmed of communities, that they admit of the greatest revolutions where no change is intended, and that the most refined politicians do not always know whither they are leading the state by their projects.<sup>25</sup>

Ronald Hamowy has argued that the theory of spontaneous order was 'perhaps the single most significant sociological contribution made by ... the Scottish Enlightenment.'<sup>26</sup> Though Ferguson utilized the theory to great effect, its origins lay in the work of previous writers, particularly Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714–1730). Highly controversial due to its promotion of private vice as generative of the public good, its influence on later Scottish thought was significant, both as inspiration and counterpoint.<sup>27</sup> Mandeville was one of the first thinkers to assert that frugality, while being virtuous, was not socially useful. He argued that it was the selfish and unthinking prodigality that allowed the production of goods and commerce to thrive. It was the vice of luxury and greed that brought about economic benefit for all.<sup>28</sup>

While some scholars have taken this base idea and expanded it to evaluate a broad spectrum of human actions and consequences, the theory of spontaneous

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald Hamowy, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Theory of Spontaneous Order* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7. How the Scottish Enlightenment saw Mandeville was largely dependent on how they interpreted the 'Private Vice, Public Virtue' idea. Hutcheson contended that Mandeville was unanswerable because he was carefully ambiguous. Five different means on interpreting the vice/virtue idea can be supported from passages in *Fable of the Bees* and could be argued to support any number of social theory positions held by Ferguson, Hume or Smith, all of whom can be said to have included some form of Mandeville's ideas. M. M. Goldsmith's study of Mandeville's influence on the Scottish Enlightenment provides the beginning of a discussion that requires much further debate. See M. M. Goldsmith, 'Regulating Anew the Moral and Political Sentiments of Mankind: Bernard Mandeville and the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 49 (1988), 587–613.

<sup>28</sup> Hamowy, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Theory of Spontaneous Order*, 8.

order in the Scottish Enlightenment context deals more specifically with those acts whose unintended consequences result in ‘complex social patterns’.<sup>29</sup> This idea was striking in that it was completely counterintuitive when compared with the argument from design.<sup>30</sup> When one saw the complexity of the legal and social structures in eighteenth-century Europe, the natural conclusion was that these structures were the result of wise planning and conscious, end-oriented action. However, the Scottish writers believed that this conclusion countered the evidence of their conjectural history.

For Ferguson, the impetus or cause for improvement in societal institutions and practices is rooted in common human propensities for both self-preservation and garrulous association. However, these propensities or dispositions were, in his view, unrelated to human notions of benevolent design or future vision.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in Ferguson’s thought – and in the thinking of most luminaries in the Scottish Enlightenment – the mode of theorizing which later commentators termed ‘spontaneous order’ allowed self-preservation instincts to be included as part of the dynamic force for progress. In all the small policies and decisions made over the centuries without regard to any particular benefits for society in the long run, the Scottish writers saw a pattern of events that brought order from the seeming chaos. That the unique blend of order and individual freedom inherent in the British constitution and laws were the result of the oftentimes self-seeking policies of petty lords, magistrates, and tyrants was well understood by the literati. For them it was not just a strange quirk of fate, but the foundation of all the complexity they saw in the present world. The mass of human beings, serving their own interests, actually created social benefits for the body politic. Ferguson saw this in regard to the formation of civil society and government; Adam Smith fathomed it in the principles of national wealth creation; David Hume earlier argued for it amidst the construction of the legal edifice; John Millar understood it as the basis of the European system of ranks. As each aspect of British life had arrived at a place of apparent excellence without any wise judiciary or inspired guidance, they determined that it was the very disorder of self-interested behaviour that caused society to develop along orderly lines. This idea formed the bedrock of their social thinking and

<sup>29</sup> This larger idea is often called ‘the law of heterogeneity of ends’ and includes ‘the whole spectrum of unintended outcomes within this concept, regardless of their specific nature.’ Ibid, 4.

<sup>30</sup> However it can be argued that such an idea is derived from the notion of the ‘great chain of being’. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper and Row, 1936), 376.

<sup>31</sup> David Allan, *Adam Ferguson* (Aberdeen: AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, 2006), 88.

propelled the theory of spontaneous order into the consciousness of educated Scotland.

### **Stoicism and the Divine Governance of Society**

The idea of the uncountable blind actions and decisions of self-interested individuals ultimately leading to the emergence of the institutions of British life and culture that the Scots looked upon with eminent pride fostered the notion among the more theistic of them that the hand of providence was the guiding force behind them. This was Adam Smith's invisible hand; less an impersonal force as has been argued by some modern readings, but the invisible actions of the Deity who used the natural means to enact the divine plan. This was also emphasized by Ferguson in his understanding of the teleology inherent in society, where the short term changes were wrought by individuals but the long term results were directed by God.<sup>32</sup> God's guidance came in the form of 'providentially arranged human nature', working instinctively to create natural structures for the betterment of society.<sup>33</sup> Society, with its vastly complex legal, social and economic structures, had reached such heights by divine design. The institutions that the society had produced were part of God's plan, despite the unknowable telic goal.

The philosophical foundations for this understanding of the universe as a machine-like system overseen by divine intelligence was a particular facet of the stoicism underpinning the ideas of both Smith and Ferguson. Stoic philosophy saw the whole of the natural world order as a kind of 'cosmic harmony' in which the patterns of life and the functioning of human actions were directed toward the purposes set out by the 'great Conductor' or divine being whose providential care oversaw the universe.<sup>34</sup> The virtuous man understood that his own ethical role in the functioning of the system within society was limited, not only by the limitations of his abilities, but because of the narrowness of his understanding.<sup>35</sup> The stoic idea that good could come out of evil meant that the moral agent had no clear understanding of how the ill he saw in social institutions was working toward the good of the whole.<sup>36</sup>

With the universe construed as a vast machine operated by God, the path of social advancement and the creation of social institutions could be left to

<sup>32</sup> Lisa Hill, 'The Invisible Hand of Adam Ferguson', *The European Legacy*, 3 (1998), 53.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Introduction to Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (eds) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 7.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 237.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

the hand of divine providence. Using human nature's common propensities to gradually form complex social structures beyond the wisdom of any single human mind, the conductor of the universe could be trusted to form the institutions that were necessary for the advancement of civilization and dissolve those that became obstacles to social progress. That belief underpinned Ferguson's reluctant response to the campaign for Abolition.

### **The Legitimacy of Existing Social Institutions**

Spontaneous order allowed Ferguson and other Scottish historians to account for the rise of various positive institutions that together constituted British commercial society. If the multitude of individual actions aimed at personal interest combined to gradually produce beneficial outcomes for all, similarly negative institutions, arising from an earlier but now abandoned utility, withered and died due to this same accumulated force of individual actions. For the Scottish literati, history was replete with examples of morally reprehensible practices which had been eradicated by the eroding forces of spontaneous order. Their studies of the past and comparisons with the customs of contemporary 'savage' societies allowed them to show that the impersonal civilizing forces of gradual progress in the arts and sciences altered the sentiments of the people to the point that barbaric but obsolete practices were naturally abandoned. However, though the various writers of social history in the eighteenth century provided examples of the obsolescence of negative social practices in past ages, their choices tended to be self-congratulatory. Scottish writers pointed out those examples of structures and institutions that contrasted other societies from their own and the local absence of which demonstrated the superiority of European society.

In an example of such reasoning, when discussing the practice of infanticide, Smith was quick to claim its complete incompatibility with the 'plainest principles of right and wrong'<sup>37</sup> and that 'No society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men's conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice'.<sup>38</sup> He was adamant that human sentiments should never be 'perverted' by such a 'uniform continuance of the custom' that would lead people to accept such murder as acceptable to public utility.<sup>39</sup> This having been said, the Britain of Smith could look with superior eyes upon infanticide as it had long ago criminalized the exposing of infants to perish in the streets.<sup>40</sup> It

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 209.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 210.

<sup>40</sup> The first criminal law against the exposure of infants was enacted under the Roman

was in the distant past for Britain and so Smith's outrage could be safely aired with full knowledge that his readers shared his disapprobation.<sup>41</sup> This enlightened superiority broke down when it came to the practice of colonial slavery. It was acknowledged as inexpedient, but as it was still lawful and considered economically vital, it was not the subject of particular illustrative condemnation by Smith. The social theory of Smith and Ferguson allowed for the condemnation of certain institutions considered obsolete but they did not specify any sort of mechanism for the deliberate removal of such institutions if they were still in use.

The institutions of Britain in particular were not often subject to criticism by the literati, except when they were seen to be an obstacle to the economic freedom or political virtue of the individual. David Spadafora has argued that the reason the Scottish literati did not share the social or political discontent with the structures of Church or State that was characteristic of the dissenting French Enlightenment writers was that they themselves were members in good standing of the societal elite.<sup>42</sup> While this is true to an extent, their establishment within the existing social order was not the sole reason behind their enthusiasm for the existing state of politics and religion. The Scottish literati did not seek the reform of politics, commerce and the social order because they felt a strong sense of the hand of providence in the emergence of these very institutions.

Such a view of the providential nature of the evolved society encouraged a high regard for the legitimacy of the institutions in existence that had developed over time. Accordingly, Smith argued passionately for an acceptance of the social, economic, and governmental institutions of the day not merely for pragmatic utility, but in faith of their legitimacy in the divine order.<sup>43</sup> Institutions emerging from spontaneous order were not just the best random chance could produce; they were stamped with the seal of the Almighty. Institutions produced

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Emperor Valentinian in 374AD. W.V.Harris, 'Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 84 (1994), 19.

<sup>41</sup> This having been said, Lord Kames argued that exposure of infants was preferable to founding hospitals where 'thousands perish yearly beyond the ordinary proportion; whereas few infants perish by the liberty of exposing them, parental affection generally prevailing over the distress of poverty'. It was an unusual argument and his footnote does not give a rationale for his assertion. Henry Home Kames Lord, *Sketches of the History of Man* (2 vols; Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1774), I: 59.

<sup>42</sup> David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 227–37. These arguments for the acceptance of institutions, even if they produced injustice, were largely added to the final edition of *TMS* published just before his death in 1790. It is highly likely that Smith was influenced by reports of the early days of the French Revolution.

over time as a result of the unconscious mass of instinctive decisions guided by providence had a greater legitimacy than those summoned into being by the well-meaning but inadequate attempts of reformers and legislators. Ferguson, in speaking of the evolutionary emergence of participatory government under the Hanoverian regime, argued that such a system was 'evidence of the invariable superiority of those structures and institutions delivered to us as unintentional consequences'.<sup>44</sup> 'Men, in fact', Ferguson asserted, 'while they pursue in society different objects, or separate views, procure a wide distribution of power, and by a species of chance, arrive at a posture for civil engagements, more favourable to human nature than what human wisdom could ever calmly devise.'<sup>45</sup>

### **The Reluctance to Reform**

It would be erroneous to conclude from this however that Ferguson and the literati respected the established order as sacred. They were not conservatives in the sense that all change was perceived to be negative, or that time-honoured customs were sacrosanct. However, in postulating the idea of spontaneous order, they did build the philosophical basis for perceiving institutions as being providential and that one should only alter them with the utmost caution. Ferguson's particular understanding of 'spontaneously-generated order' in the social and political realm meant that the idea of reform itself was suspect, particularly if it came from a desire to promote adventurous schemes for economic or social improvement.<sup>46</sup> He acknowledged that some aspects of spontaneously-generated institutions, particularly the division of labour, had the potential to hasten a descent into retrogressive modes of polity such as political despotism. However, his solution was not to legislate to curb these institutions. Rather, he sought to promote a greater sense of 'public spirit' to counter increasing social and economic stratification in both civilian and military life.<sup>47</sup> For governments to meddle in the wealth-creation activities of individuals and groups was to invite potential disaster.<sup>48</sup> Ferguson thus could be considered a conservative when it came to considering reform. There is little framework in Ferguson's thought for bringing deliberate legislative change to the economic or political sphere, as any such change would be the product of individuals whose ability to

<sup>44</sup> Allan, *Adam Ferguson*, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 225.

<sup>46</sup> This term is used extensively by Ronald Hamowy in his analysis of Ferguson's contribution to Enlightenment thought. See Ronald Hamowy, 'Progress and Commerce in Anglo-American Thought: The Social Philosophy of Adam Ferguson', *Interpretation*, 14 (1986), 61–88.

<sup>47</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 199–203.

<sup>48</sup> Hamowy, 'Progress and Commerce', 86.

bring about transformation would be inferior to the natural forces of spontaneously-generated orders. In his biography of Ferguson David Allan has argued that the professor's response to the various controversies of his lifetime was 'scepticism in the face of those late-eighteenth-century contemporaries who advocated radical change.'<sup>49</sup> Ferguson responded to a variety of situations with an 'instinctive caution' and he refused to participate in any corrective action, even when his own dissatisfaction with the current political situation was evident. His sceptically quietist reaction to the many arguments for societal reform fermenting during his lifetime was, as Allan has argued, 'entirely consistent with Ferguson's approach as a philosophical historian.' Allan continues:

For it was precisely because long-evolving structures for the peaceful government of society, such as those Hanoverian Britain possessed, were actually the benign but unintended product of countless individual actions and decisions over the centuries, that they in truth required, at most, only further modest amendment at the hands of careful modern legislators.<sup>50</sup>

For Ferguson, by and large, deliberate reform was unnecessary as the current political and social environment had developed its own method of weeding out those practices and institutions that did not benefit civil society. Taking a similar line to Smith in that economic pursuits (at least in relation to property) were to be the engine of gradual change, any reform that hindered the free running of the acquisition, maintenance and transfer of property was counter-productive to positive transformation. It was better to abandon grand plans for social reform and to trust in the slow moving, invisible hand of providence to determine what is best, than to interfere in the hope of impractical and unobtainable results.<sup>51</sup> It is in this frame of reference that Ferguson approached the situation in France in the early 1790s,' somewhat ambivalently opining that any form of systematic government dreamt up by the leaders of the French Revolution would naturally be inferior to that which had evolved over centuries through the unconscious actions of the French people.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, in denying the myths of the original legislator Ferguson argued that the idea that human beings had such mythic wisdom that they could shape society at their will was ludicrous as no

<sup>49</sup> Allan, *Adam Ferguson*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 233. Though Smith argued most passionately in this vein, Ferguson's ideas were along the same line.

<sup>52</sup> Allan, *Adam Ferguson*, 89.

one had such capabilities. Furthermore, he also argued that the traditional histories attributing the greatness of the ancient classical societies to these founding fathers were entertaining 'unreasonable expectations of people's tolerance for rapid change'.<sup>53</sup> People had a predisposition to adhere to the familiar and to distrust change. To assert that the masses in Athens, Sparta, or Rome were of a different type of people 'ready to adopt, with joy, every plan of improvement' was simply implausible.<sup>54</sup> Ferguson feared that myths of the great men might encourage others to attempt to shape society after their own goals and ideals.

Ferguson's understanding of the evolution of civic society thus resulted in scepticism toward the value of direct human action in the wider world, but he did not publicly argue for a retreat from such action. In the midst of an outpouring of popular activism after the French Revolution, Ferguson argued that the correct response was to withhold support for movements that advocated reform. He believed that anyone who thought he could bend systems, established through the forces of spontaneous order, to their own will was delusional.<sup>55</sup>

### Ferguson's Tacit Rejection of Abolitionism

The social philosophy of Ferguson was becoming increasingly detached from the ideas and enthusiasm for reform of the bulk of educated but disenfranchised people in the United Kingdom. The Scottish Enlightenment thinkers had taught people to question the underpinnings of slavery, and the people were now ready to act to remove it. The Scots might agree with their 'liberal sentiments'<sup>56</sup> but they could not provide them with a means to turn their desire for 'universal benevolence' into concrete action to change their world. The popular movements for change, actively encouraged by the French *philosophes*, were shunned by Ferguson, who refused to throw the weight of his reputation behind the abolition movement. This was because he believed that social change was best achieved by slow evolution. The underpinnings of his social theory – what we have termed 'spontaneous order' – decreed that self-interest and trust in divine providence were the cornerstones of the current success of British commercial society. Therefore, he argued that to legislate for the removal of a

<sup>53</sup> Hill, 'The Invisible Hand of Adam Ferguson', 49.

<sup>54</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 120.

<sup>55</sup> Hill, 'The Invisible Hand of Adam Ferguson', 49.

<sup>56</sup> In the very last lines of his 1779 edition of *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* John Millar wrote that the 'Knight Vs Wedderburn' decision (1778) was 'an authentic testimony of the liberal sentiments entertained in the latter part of the eighteenth century'. John Millar, *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; London: J. Murray, 1779), 362.

particular institution was against the natural tendency for preserving wealth-producing commercial activities and would produce unintended consequences that could result in disaster for Britain. While philanthropy was encouraged, its scope had to remain within the bounds of one's own personal sphere, promoting the happiness of those personally connected to the individual. By limiting benevolence to the personal sphere the potential for disrupting society at large was curtailed. The kind of 'universal benevolence' that the Abolitionists campaigned for in petitioning Parliament to enact legislation immediately outlawing the Slave Trade was an example of social engineering. While it held out the attraction of helping the great mass of Africans held in bondage, this kind of large scale manipulation of one institution threatened consequences that were unknowable and therefore possibly too great a risk to be pursued for the sake of easing the conscience of philanthropists.

### The Scottish Enlightenment's Political Influence on Abolition

At the time of the parliamentary debates on the slave trade, the government was unequally divided between those passionately seeking its immediate abolition and those who felt that any interference would trample the rights of slave owners and bring disaster upon the British economy. When the antislavery activists sought out the support of eminent Scottish literati for the abolitionist movement they were met with disappointment.<sup>57</sup> While some scholars like John Millar responded with amicable friendship to the visit of Abolitionist activist William Dickson to Glasgow in 1792, there is little to indicate that any prominent Scottish philosophers gave any support to William Wilberforce's Slave Trade abolition bill. Instead, where their influence may be detected is in the political response of the politicians closest to them. Key members of the House of Commons such as Edmund Burke and Henry Dundas had been strongly influenced by the historical theories of Scottish moral philosophy. Both Burke and Dundas had been previous rectors of the University of Glasgow and both had strong personal connections with thinkers such as Adam Ferguson, Adam

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<sup>57</sup> Various influential abolitionists wrote to such Scottish literati as James Beattie of Aberdeen. Seen by many as a natural partisan due to his published critique of Hume's racism in his book *Essay on the Nature of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Skepticism* (1770), Beattie refused repeatedly to publish in detail on the subject until after the early parliamentary debates had ended. In another open letter, an anonymous critic of slavery styling himself 'Africanus' pleaded for the literati to write in support of Abolition. The response from the Universities was silence. See Glen Doris, 'An Abolitionist Too Late? James Beattie and the Scottish Enlightenment's Lost Chance to Influence the Slave Trade Debate', *The Journal of Scottish Thought*, 2 (2009), 83–97.

Smith and others.<sup>58</sup> Dundas, who as a young man defended the enslaved man, Joseph Knight in his suit against John Wedderburn, became the focus for opposition to immediate abolition in favour of a more evolutionary approach. Seeing that the tide of moral argument was in favour of Abolition, Dundas motioned to amend the bill from 'immediate abolition' of the slave trade to 'gradual'. This single phrase removed the obstacles to members voting for abolition but also diffused the impetus for taking any further action in the foreseeable future. When challenged by supporters of immediate abolition to come up with a plan to make gradual abolition work, Dundas argued that the only way to halt the trade was to ensure that the plantations would survive with the existing supply and future natural propagation of the enslaved population. Edmund Burke offered his own assessment of the matter in a letter to Dundas dated 9 April 1792 where he stated his own rejection of immediate abolition as a viable solution to the slave trade,

I am very apprehensive that so long as slavery continues some means for its supply will be found. If so, I am persuaded that it is better to allow the evil, in order to correct it, than by endeavouring to forbid, what we cannot be able wholly to prevent, to leave it under and illegal, and therefore an unreformed, existence. It is not that my plan does not lead to the extinction of the slave trade; but it is through a very slow progress, the chief effect of which is to be operated in our own plantations by rendering, in a length of time, all foreign supply unnecessary.<sup>59</sup>

In the light of Dundas' motion the arguments of the Abolitionists were fruitless; the concept of national righteousness, while certainly a motivating factor for the public's signatures on petitions, did not move the MPs whose interest lay in preserving the economic stability of the West Indies. Voting for gradualism allowed their conscience to be satisfied by holding out hope for an end to slavery while at the same time preserving their ideal of an amelioration of a

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<sup>58</sup> Smith had deep connections with Burke both personally and ideologically, although this ideological connection has been challenged. See for example Donald Winch, 'The Burke-Smith Problem and Late Eighteenth-Century Political and Economic Thought', *The Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 231–48. Dundas himself was a 'son of the Enlightenment' and 'had for years befriended its leading figures'. Michael Fry, *The Dundas Despotism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 184. Dundas' rectorship of the University of Glasgow and his correspondence all demonstrate unequivocally that the Scots politician was intimately acquainted with many of the literati.

<sup>59</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, P. J. Marshall and John A. Woods (eds) (10 vols; London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), VII: 124.

long-standing institution. In an evident adherence to the Scottish Enlightenment dogma of evolutionary societal change, their decision to adopt the limited provisions of the Dundas plan denied the validity of the abolitionists' strategy of ending the slave trade; instead they opted for the idea that they first had to ensure that West Indian slavery would thrive.

The 1792 Slave Trade Abolition bill was ultimately passed only with the 'gradual' amendment through the House of Commons, but it was halted in the House of Lords and abandoned when the war with France pushed all such considerations aside. A renewed bill finally passed through the Houses of Parliament in 1807, fifteen years later, only after many of the original opponents, including both Burke and Dundas, were no longer able to influence matters. If the ideas of Adam Ferguson were best represented by those politicians who were closest to him in mind-set and pragmatic approach, it might be said that his most significant contribution to the antislavery movement was to provide a philosophical rationale for opposing Abolition.

## Adam Ferguson on Sparta, Rome and the Fragility of Civil Liberties

Alexander Broadie

There are many elements of Ferguson's life that had a deep and readily identifiable influence on his oeuvre. This essay will focus on three in particular. The first is his engagement with the literature – especially the historical writings – of Greece and Rome. The second is his nine years spent in the British Army as a chaplain of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Highland Regiment, the Black Watch. Significantly, that regiment was the only actual *parish* which he served as a minister. A third element that should be added is the fact that he was a cradle Calvinist Presbyterian. I have in mind two points regarding this third element. One concerns his work on corruption, expressed in detail for the first time in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), especially Part VI, which is devoted to the corruption of people engaged in politics, law, and commerce.<sup>1</sup> It is not difficult to see his preoccupation with the causes and effects of corruption as a reflection of the moral theological doctrine of the Fall. Similarly, it is also easy to see his preoccupation with the progress and termination of the Roman Republic as reflecting that same theological doctrine (even if there were also large political features of eighteenth-century Europe that might naturally prompt reflection on humankind's capacity for corruption). The other point I have in mind with regard to Ferguson's Calvinist upbringing is the possible influence of his experience with the Kirk's Presbyterian form of governance on his writings concerning the political structures in Sparta and the Roman Republic – particularly on the bottom-up rather than top-down nature of those structures. These three influences underlie the impressive unity of Ferguson's oeuvre. Perhaps more than any other factors, they are assuredly at work in his thinking on the two themes of this paper: classical republicanism and our

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

tendency to corruption. I shall argue that Ferguson's doctrine concerning the fragility of our civil liberties – one of the insights that manifestly relates to classical republicanism, Calvinism and Presbyterianism – is no less valid today than it was in both the eighteenth century and in the era of Sparta and the Roman Republic.

In a sense, Ferguson's *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783) had been on his mind from his student days when he excelled in the classical languages and revelled in the literature, including the histories, of Greece and Rome.<sup>2</sup> He did not write a book on Greece, but he did make countless references to Greece. Of all the Greek city states, Ferguson seems to have most admired Sparta. This admiration indicates that he was not quite in step with his fellow literati David Hume and Adam Smith on essential matters relating to the proper form of society (for whom Athens must have seemed to be superior in every way to militaristic Sparta). However, after his nine years in the Black Watch, Ferguson was very aware of the sovereign importance of a society's ability to defend itself. On this matter he reports with approval the classical doctrine that since the possessions of the vanquished pertain to the victor, it follows that the first thing required of a leader is not that he should provide positive benefits for his country, but instead that he should ensure that it can protect itself effectively against an invader.<sup>3</sup>

As can be seen by the way it dealt with the question of discipline, Sparta took this doctrine to heart more comprehensively than any other of the Greek city states. All societies require a certain level of discipline – for otherwise their laws will not be obeyed. What made Sparta special was that, as Ferguson puts it: "The discipline of Sparta was military."<sup>4</sup> Bearing in mind Mirabeau's famous statement that other states had an army but in Prussia the army had a state, it might be said that Sparta did not have an army, it was one, and accordingly the virtues that should unite an army and make it strong permeated Spartan society. The virtues at issue here are three in number: obedience, fortitude and zeal for the public.<sup>5</sup> However, obedience and fortitude – considered apart from zeal – are not enough to ensure the security of the state. The third virtue – zeal for the public – was what especially held Ferguson's attention, for it was this that motivated the Spartan armies. The soldiers who fought for Sparta were themselves Spartans, dedicated to Sparta and willing to die for Sparta's

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1856).

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 141

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 142.

sake: Those fighting for Sparta were not foreign troops, mercenaries who were paid to fight alongside Spartans or, even worse, to fight instead of Spartans. Ferguson speaks with contempt of “mighty armies put in motion from behind the counter” (that is, motivated by pay), and he notes “how often human blood is, without any national animosity, bought and sold for bills of exchange.”<sup>6</sup>

For Ferguson, however, the truly significant point about Spartan discipline is not that it led to Sparta being better defended than it would have been if it had been defended by mercenaries, but instead that the discipline had moral effects for which it should be sovereignly prized. In short, it gave rise to the Spartans having a virtuous disposition: “They had experienced the happiness of a mind courageous, disinterested, and devoted to its best affections; and they studied to preserve this character in themselves, by resigning the interests of ambition, and the hopes of military glory, even by sacrificing the numbers of their people.”<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, though the virtue gained from discipline was of primary importance, one could hardly fail to notice that that same discipline had immense advantages for the defence of the state. Such discipline was employed in defence against both external foes and against internal threats from the economic pressures that Ferguson seemed to view as natural concomitants of commercial society. Ferguson certainly has things to say about the process of fragmentation from which modern commercial society is in danger of suffering when economic imperatives that motivate the citizens begin to outweigh moral imperatives. Such a process becomes dangerous when each citizen regards compatriots first and foremost as sources of economic benefit to himself. Spartan military discipline and the virtue consequent upon it were perceived by Ferguson to be effective bulwarks against that kind of corruption.

However, there must remain differences between military discipline so far as it is practised on the battlefield and so far as it is practised in civilian life. The most important of these differences relates to the place of personal freedom in the life of the individual. The fighter resigns his personal freedom when a military superior gives him an order. There are times and places for expressing doubts about the merits of military tactics but they do not include a battlefield at the moment that an order is received. The soldier’s proper response is to obey the order, not to dispute its merit. On the other hand, the citizen in his civilian life must retain his personal liberty in relation to the political deliberations in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 142.

the state. Thus to say 'yes' to a superior officer and to say 'no' to a protagonist in a public dispute both constitute obedience to the disciplinary principles of the state. It is a citizen's duty to defend the state, which he does in battle as a member of an obedient fighting force, and which he does equally in the political arena by his public scrutiny of proposed policies and projects.

The concept of Spartans as a nation of fighters is familiar but the idea of Spartans as a nation in which the citizens are also politicians who argue in the public domain as part of the political decision-making process is not so well-known. For Ferguson, however, the citizen as politician is no less important a part of the story than is that same citizen as fighter. Most significant for Ferguson, these two roles are indivisible – they embody the Spartans' 'zeal for the public' in conjunction with their fiercely maintained discipline. It is this discipline that Ferguson wishes to see (modulated to an appropriate key) in the Age of Enlightenment. Of course there are many new sorts of civilities and refinements on display in the latter half of the eighteenth century. However, Ferguson's message is that a rejuvenated Sparta, duly amended to account for modern conditions without a loss of basic Spartan values, would be no bad thing.

The virtue of equality is one further element in Spartan society that held Ferguson's attention as having a message for his own generation. Two points should be made under this head. There was a kind of equality in the army, not in the sense that it had no hierarchy but rather in the sense that the fact that a man was a general in one campaign did not mean that he would not be a private soldier serving in the ranks in the next.<sup>8</sup> A Spartan general could not come to believe that he had a natural right of command. As Ferguson puts the point, "a national force is best formed, where numbers of men are inured to equality; and where the meanest citizen may consider himself, upon occasion, as destined to command as well as to obey."<sup>9</sup> The Spartan army therefore does not have a natural hierarchy, in the sense that there are those born to command and those born to obey. This stands in sharp contrast to the norm in the armies of eighteenth-century Europe, where top echelons were manned almost entirely by members of the upper classes.

Here again the Spartan army mirrored social interaction in civilian society that was not significantly hierarchical. In the latter, one citizen could regard himself as approximately the equal of any other in the processes of public decision making. The question, therefore, concerned whose proposals best

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 144.

responded to present or anticipated problems. This is an equality not dissimilar to the equality of citizens in the Enlightenment Republic of Letters, where social standing was insignificant, and the quality of intellectual input into a discussion or dispute was the crucial thing. Ferguson was not opposed to people having property, or even to people leading materially comfortable lives. His opposition was to societies in which there was a significantly unequal distribution of wealth, for this naturally leads to distinctions of rank with wealth determining who rules and who obeys. This, in Ferguson's opinion, is a principle of corruption in society. He believes that in Greece the Spartans (and the Spartans alone) understood this well. Moreover, it was because of their understanding of this situation that the Spartans sought to prevent an uneven distribution of wealth in the state by educating the citizens into the habits of moderation and equity. Ferguson turns to Xenophon for a summation of what it was that made the Spartans so special: "the Spartans should excel every nation, being the only state in which virtue is studied as the object of government."<sup>10</sup>

Ferguson's exposition of Spartan society is matched, though with much more detail attached, by his analysis of Rome in *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*. Again, in the Republic – as was the case in Sparta – the virtues of obedience, fortitude and zeal for the public are prominently portrayed. Attention is also paid to the role of the citizen as politician by highlighting the fact that through the course of the Roman Republic citizens played an active part in politics, though to diminishing effect. For example, Ferguson discusses the relations between the patricians and the plebeians during the earlier period of the Republic. He focuses both on the close attention paid by the plebeians to the political activities of the patricians and to the plebeians' well-considered practical responses to those activities, particularly as regards the civil rights of the plebeians themselves. As Ferguson expresses it:

These rights were understood, by degrees, to imply equality, and, in the successive institutions that followed, put every citizen in possession of equal pretension to preferment and honours; pretensions which were to be limited only by the great distinction which Nature has made between the capacities, merits, and characters of men, and which are subject, in every community, to be warped by the effects of education and fortune.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>11</sup> Ferguson, *Roman Republic*, 29.

At this stage in the development of the Republic the plebeians had a civil right, recognised in practice and not just in law, to full participation in the legislative and law-enforcement activities of the state. As just indicated, the plebeians were robust in their exercise of this right.

Likewise Ferguson attends to the fact that Republican Rome was defended by citizen armies. Soldiers in such armies were motivated by zeal for the public. Neither foreign nor mercenary troops were used. Indeed, it is not inappropriate to apply to the earlier years of the Roman Republic the phrase used earlier of Sparta – that it *was*, rather than had, an army. Ferguson affirms this: “It is understood in the antiquities of this people, that when they were assembled for any purpose, whether of state or of war, they were termed the army.” He adds in evident clarification of this linguistic practice that

no citizen could aspire to any of the higher offices in the commonwealth, until he had been enrolled in the legions, either ten years if on horseback, or sixteen years if on foot; and, notwithstanding the special commissions that were occasionally given for separate objects of state or of war, civil and military rank were never disjoined.

Unsurprisingly, Ferguson concludes that ‘it may be difficult to determine, whether we are to consider the Roman establishment as civil or military.’<sup>12</sup> The strength that this melding of civil and military roles confers on the state is in contrast to the comparative weakness of Carthage, the Roman Republic’s greatest enemy. Carthage’s weakness was incurred through its strategy of leaving its citizens to get on with the business of amassing wealth while putting the task of defence into the hands of foreigners. Ferguson, whose enthusiasm for citizen armies was already manifest nearly thirty years earlier during his campaign on behalf of a Scottish militia, presses home this point in his *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*. He describes the Carthaginians in these terms:

Their armies, for the most part, were composed of Numidians, Mauritians, Spaniards, Gauls, and fugitive slaves from every country around them. They were among the few nations of the world who had the ingenuity, or rather the misfortune, to make war without becoming military ...<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 36.

Ferguson would later deploy this persuasive account of the underlying weakness of an apparently strong Carthage in his analysis of the decline of Rome itself after the Republic was transformed into an Empire.

Nevertheless, there are, predictably, aspects of the Roman Republic that Ferguson does not like. This includes the relentlessness of Rome's militarism, a relentlessness that suggests that Romans, or at least those with executive power, believed that Rome could survive within its borders only by extending them. However, Republican Rome did have features that Ferguson admired and these he carried forward into his critique of society in his own day. Above all, as we shall see, he believed that his critical analysis of Sparta and the Roman Republic points a way to reversing a process suffered by many citizens; namely, the process of moral degradation that afflicts them when they prioritise their wish for a more luxurious lifestyle. He thought that their material refinement and sensibility comes at the cost of jeopardising their moral refinement and sensibility. Higher consumption, measured according to economic principles of assessment, can only be part of the story of a society's attainments. What of the qualities of the inner life, the tranquillity of mind that the Stoics so much sought or the sense of satisfaction with one's lot almost whatever one's lot may be? Certainly captains of industry in the eighteenth century would not be keen to encourage tranquillity of mind or a sense of satisfaction with one's lot. They would prefer people to be looking round enviously at their neighbour's possessions and seeking to match them. For such entrepreneurs, it is not satisfaction with one's lot, but dissatisfaction that propels the commercial market forward and upward.

Ferguson's point of departure for his study of modern civil society is his study of classical history, especially of Greece and Rome as recounted by Thucydides, Xenophon, Livy, Sallust, Tacitus, Aulus Gellius, Polybius and others. Nothing struck Ferguson more strongly regarding Sparta and the Roman Republic than the citizen's dual roles, as warrior and politician. Regarding the political side of this equation, let us pause on one aspect: the rhetorical. Two concepts of a human being that we have inherited from Greece and Rome are first, that a human being is a rational animal, and second, that this being is a speaking animal. These two concepts converge in the person of the orator, who has mastered the art of speech in two senses. On the one hand, he has mastered logic, or the art of reasoning which enables him to construct valid arguments. On the other hand, he has also perfected the art of rhetoric, which equips him to present his arguments in such a way as to persuade his audience. The connection between logic and rhetoric is clear; Plato had defined rheto-

ric as the art of persuasion by speech, to which it has to be added (and was added by Aristotle) that there is no better way of persuading by speech than by presenting people with a clearly expressed, sound argument. Ferguson, who was attentive to the role of the orators in Greece and Rome, believed that the role of the orator should not be reserved for the few. Instead, he thought that it is an art that should be practised by all the citizens. To that end, Ferguson believed it was the responsibility of the generality of citizens, not just the members of certain distinguished families or clans, to contribute to discussion, debate and dispute on matters of practical significance relating to public policy. In a republic the practical decisions about public policy are therefore taken by the citizens – the vast majority, not the few – in consequence of their exercises in the public use of reason. All this is a framework for Ferguson's affirmation that, notwithstanding certain particular powers of the Roman senate, "the people ... had reserved the sovereignty to themselves, and, in their several assemblies, exercised the powers of legislation, and conferred all the offices of state."<sup>14</sup>

This concept of republican citizenship bears a striking resemblance to a concept, mentioned above, with which the enlightened ones of Europe were at home. This concept was the Republic of Letters, an international community of people with ideas who published their ideas for wide-spread public consumption. This public literary space allowed people with ideas to spread them across local and national boundaries and therefore to be disseminated anywhere to be commented on, analysed, improved, or refuted. By this means a Darwinism in respect of ideas is created, by which certain ideas are seen to survive public scrutiny (to the extent that they prove defensible in the process of cross-examination before a public tribunal of reason) whereas others fail to survive cross-examination. This is a bottom-up system in the sense that ideas are not imposed on people by sovereign authorities. Rather, all submit their ideas to the intellect of the people, who give their assent, or refuse to do so, on the basis of what they judge to be their intellectual merits and not on the basis of the authority of the creator of the ideas. The classical republican ideal which Ferguson articulated is home to roughly the sort of rhetorical behaviour I have just described, save for the fact that in the classical republican debates of Sparta and the Roman Republic during the early part of its span, the debates were on matters of practical significance and were part of the decision-making political process.

Consequently, if the citizens of a republic become docile the republic will

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 29.

fail. The well-being of republican institutions requires not merely the public use of reason but more particularly the public use of reason in dispute. It is far better that people be disputatious, ready to argue, to defend a position until the position is well and truly undermined by counter-arguments. If people lose their disputatiousness, a public space will be created into which despotism will move. Disputatiousness is therefore a civic virtue in Ferguson's judgment, both a bulwark against despotism and also a defence of liberty. Likewise, it is therefore a "refractory and turbulent zeal" for justice.<sup>15</sup> While some think unanimity a good thing, Ferguson would beg to differ:

our very praise of unanimity, therefore, is to be considered as a danger to liberty. We wish for it at the hazard of taking in its place, the remissness of men grown indifferent to the public; the venality of those who have sold the rights of their country; or the servility of others, who give implicit obedience to a leader by whom their minds are subdued.<sup>16</sup>

Ferguson is not calling for a class of disputatious politicians. Rather, his position is larger and much closer to the position he found in Sparta and Republican Rome; he believes the best bulwark against despotism to be a disputatious, turbulent citizenry. Not just some, but all citizens should see it as their duty, in defence of their civil liberties, to exercise the modern equivalent of attending gatherings at the forum and raising their voices in argumentative discourse for or against proposals that have been put to the citizens. Of course we all think that citizens in a liberal democracy have a political role to play, even if it is only that of casting a vote once every few years for a political representative. But Ferguson is calling for much more than that. Anything less than a zealous public defence of our liberties will result in the encroachment of despotism, and a corresponding loss of those same liberties. This zealous defence must be undertaken by the many. From a Fergusonian perspective there should ideally not be a distinct class of politicians, but instead all the citizens should be politically active, to the extent that if there is a political class, all the citizens are members. Despots are corrupt. At the same time, Ferguson is no less sure that if the people become politically quiescent and thereby create a space for despotism to suppress people's civil liberties, then the citizens' quiescence is a sign that they themselves have become corrupted. I should like finally to

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<sup>15</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 160

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

consider these two corruptions in turn: the corruption of the ordinary citizens and the corruption of the despot.

Luxury is on the side of the good since it promotes economic productivity, encourages patronage of the arts, and all in all results in people's lives being culturally enhanced. But luxury is not on the side of the good insofar as it leads people to focus on their creaturely comforts, their vanity and their own economic superiority. Successful advertising of luxuries can shift a person's values so that he serves the self more than he serves society, or, as Ferguson would say, he comes to act in the spirit of the self rather than in the spirit of society. In particular, we will increasingly tend to look out on the world from the perspective of a *homo economicus* rather than from that of a *homo moralis*. That is, we will be predisposed to see others as sources of economic benefit to ourselves rather than seeing others as people who might need our sympathy or our help. Sympathy binds society, but by contrast the profit motive is a principle of social fragmentation. If a person is gripped by the profit motive, it has the effect of diminishing a sense of the moral value of individuals and of society. Such a person is less likely to be moved by the spirit of society. Consequently, they are less likely to behave in a republican spirit by participating in public discussion and dispute from a sense that the best thing for society will emerge from such exercises in the public use of reason.

There is therefore a danger that unremitting attention to the economic needs of the self will result in a withdrawal from political activity and a corresponding move towards a form of political tranquillity or quietism. This results in the many – recognizing that the state requires political activity – leaving politics to the few, who will then be expected to do what is required on behalf of the many. This tranquillity is a sign of corruption among the citizens who have lost their spirit of society and allowed the spirit of self to move into the vacated space. It is when the citizenry separate out into two classes, the politically active and the politically passive, that the republic is dead. The checks and balances that ensure the continuation of civil liberties are dismantled, for, on the whole, politicians do not like to be checked and balanced. Gradually the citizens find that civil liberties, which were theirs by right, have become theirs as a privilege or favour, and then have been withdrawn.

In effect, Ferguson's oeuvre – at least from his early *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (1756), through the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) to the *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783) – can be set out as an argument to the effect that the best way for citizens to ensure that their state does not descend into despotism is for them to be

vigorously participatory on behalf of civil society. They must be willing and eager to contribute to public debate on matters of public concern, and when necessary to be refractory and turbulent in their zeal for justice. This, it seems to me, is as true now as it was in Ferguson's day, for the dangers of despotism are no less strong now than they were then, and civil society is no less in need of a turbulent and refractory citizenry now than it was then.

## The Scientific Historian: Epistemology and Politics in Adam Ferguson's *Progress and Termination*

Xandra Bello

In his 1820s correspondence with Jane Baillie Welsh, the historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle sketched a formative curriculum for a prospective young writer. What had started as a small request from Welsh soon metastasized into a long explanation from Carlyle about the value of historical studies for modern literature and their seemingly symbiotic relationship with the progress of civilization. To gain literary success, Carlyle argued, one must:

set apart some hours of every day for the purpose of study; I would read and think and imagine; I would familiarize myself with whatever great or noble thing men have done or conceived since the commencement of civilization – that is I would study their history, their philosophy, their literature – endeavouring all the while not merely to recollect but to apply, nor merely to have in my possession but to nourish myself with all these accumulated stores of the Past, and to strengthen my hands with them for adding to the stores of the future.<sup>1</sup>

Following the popular trends in British historiography during the early nineteenth century, Carlyle advised Welsh to study the histories of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle to Jane Baillie Welsh, 28 October, 1822 in Brent. E. Kinser (ed.), *The Carlyle Letters Online* [CLO] [database online], (Duke University Press, 2007– [cited 21 January 2015]); available from <http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/>

David Hume, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon.<sup>2</sup> This unoriginal recommendation gave Carlyle's reflection a practical dimension and, in doing this, he successfully interwove literary and historical canons. Carlyle's views about the value of history rested on a definition of history as a collection of human experiences that demanded from its readers an immersion in the past which would lead to improvements in one's own existence. At its core, this interpretation endorsed the notion that there were principles underpinning human experiences that transcended the historicity of specific actions. In other words, it rendered the past perpetually relevant: there was always something to be learnt from a bygone era. In this context, fiction merely offered an alternative path from history to explore the universality of human nature and its practical consequences.

Carlyle's approach to historical writing was not particularly original during the early nineteenth century. Indeed, his view of history was deeply rooted in the writings of eighteenth-century historians such as the 'triumvirate' of authors – Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon – that he had recommended Welsh study closely as preparation for her own writing.<sup>3</sup> For these eighteenth-century authors, history was first and foremost an exemplary narrative built on premises of scientific accuracy. They also viewed it as an intrinsically political discourse as well as a moral narrative. To write history was to aim to shape the political nation through the detailed and truthful representation of earlier experiences, understood as scientific data, that when properly processed would reveal to the critical reader the universal principles of human nature. It was this scientifically gathered knowledge that modern readers ought to use to inform their moral choices. After all, the principles that one might infer from the study of history offered them one unparalleled advantage: unlike the moral lessons conveyed by imaginative literature, these principles had already been tested by real human beings.

Setting aside for the moment the question of the scientific dimension of historical writing, its educational aspect had also been a key feature of the historiography of the Scottish Enlightenment represented here by the works of Hume and Robertson. In that sense, Carlyle's suggestions echoed the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esquire: With Memoirs of his Life and Writings composed by Himself* (2 vols, Dublin: P. Wogan, L. White et al., 1796), I: 148. While reflecting upon the literary fame that he had achieved as a historian, Gibbon was particularly pleased with the praise that his work had gained from Robertson and Hume.

works of his predecessors. Moreover, from a historical viewpoint, the moral and political value of historical narratives had been developed in antiquity and reinforced over the centuries by an education that at the turn of the nineteenth century continued to rely on the study of ancient writers for the political formation of future statesmen. Consequentially, the idea that the histories of Greece and Rome ought to function as basic political models to analyse one's reality was not a novelty by the time Gibbon produced his history of the fall of the Roman Empire. Nor was the idea a novel one by the time Carlyle reflected on the value of history for an aspiring writer. From the Middle Ages to Montesquieu, ancient history had been interpreted and re-interpreted numerous times and in a variety of literary forms to condemn or to praise certain political attitudes and discourses.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Carlyle's advice to Welsh to study histories of antiquity as well as of modern nations, was symptomatic of the traditional expectations of a young man's early political education. Yet Jane Baillie Welsh was not a young man, but rather, a young woman. Perhaps worried that Welsh lacked a classical background and hence that she could be discouraged by the minute details of Gibbon's work, Carlyle suggested to Welsh that she take a step back and begin by reading 'Ferguson's Rome, then Gibbon'.<sup>5</sup> Carlyle was referring to Adam Ferguson's lengthy *History of the Progress and the Termination of the Roman Republic*, originally published in 1783 in the aftermath of Gibbon's success and later corrected and expanded by Ferguson into a second edition published in 1799.

The fact that Carlyle decided to modify his recommendation to include Ferguson's work not only points to the importance that he attached to a solid historical education for writers, be that writer male or female, but it also offers us an initial framework to approach the central question of this article: Ferguson's epistemology and its practical application in *Progress and Termination*. In spite of being less well-known than Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, the formative value of Ferguson's *Progress and Termination* left a deep impression on some early nineteenth-century historians such as Carlyle. As late as 1866 Carlyle reiterated the suggestion to study Ferguson's work before moving onto Gibbon's to the students of the University of Edinburgh during his inaugural

<sup>4</sup> For a general overview on this topic for the British case from the eighteenth century onwards see Frank M. Turner, 'British Politics and The Demise of the Roman Republic: 1700- 1939', *Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), 577- 99.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Carlyle to Jane Baillie Welsh, 18 November, 1822 in *CLO*. In the following months he reassured her of his intention to send her a copy of Ferguson's work, had she not found one. See Thomas Carlyle to Jane Baillie Welsh, 12 January, 1823, in *CLO*.

address.<sup>6</sup> Carlyle believed that Ferguson had accurately captured the role of religion in Roman politics; but more importantly, he thought that Ferguson had conveyed in a simple and relatable manner the political history of the Roman Republic for modern readers in the early stages of their education. In Carlyle's letters to Welsh and in this inaugural address, Ferguson's *Progress and Termination* emerges as a work whose main virtue is the moral and political lessons that it might offer to the youth. If we follow Carlyle's views on history, Ferguson's work was a piece that ought to 'strengthen the hands' of its readers and helps them to build a better future for themselves and their nations. Indeed, Carlyle's friend and fellow philosopher John Stuart Mill described Ferguson's *Progress and Termination* in similar terms. In Mill's *Autobiography*, published in 1873, he recalled Ferguson's history as one of his favourite childhood readings, particularly during the period of time in which he had been deeply interested in the Licinian and Agrarian laws and the general dynamics between the aristocracy and the people.<sup>7</sup> In the eyes of these nineteenth-century philosophers, Ferguson's account of the fall of the Roman Republic functioned as an early base from which to start building one's views about the nature and progress of civilization; a source of ideas and political vocabulary to articulate one's political thought. However, as shall be argued, even though these interpretations echoed Ferguson's views about the formative value of history, his piece was much more than an educational primer for deeper historical study: it was a universal tragedy built on notions of modern scientific knowledge.

Although not the main focus of the present analysis, Carlyle's philosophy of history helps us to re-evaluate certain characteristics of the historiography of the late Scottish Enlightenment present in Ferguson's work and that have been traditionally associated with nineteenth-century Romanticism. As noted, Carlyle embraced a definition of history that emphasised what we might refer to as the sentimental dimension of historical narratives. This view presented the past not only as ruins in the present, but as penetrable intervals of lived reality. Carlyle advocated for the complete immersion of the writer in such intervals in order to apprehend them in their unique complexities; histories, he thought, should communicate and replicate that kind of existential engagement with the past for their audiences.<sup>8</sup> The controversy regarding his unusual account

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Carlyle, 'Inaugural Address at Edinburgh University' in Charles W. Elliot (ed.), *Harvard Classics* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son Company, 1909–1914), XXV: 359–89.

<sup>7</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Longmans et al., 1873), 12–15.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Carlyle's tentative outline for a history of England that focused on a

of the French Revolution in *The French Revolution: A History*, often narrated using the present tense, illustrates Carlyle's attempt to translate that idea into practice.<sup>9</sup> In his review, which ultimately reads as a defence of his friend's work, Mill argued that Carlyle's history was not only the best historical work produced in Britain in 'many years', but stressed that this was because Carlyle had produced the 'epic poetry' of a revolution in human consciousness rather than the history of gigantic and distant characters – 'algebraic symbols' – in the tradition of Hume's and Gibbon's histories.<sup>10</sup>

There is no indication that Ferguson envisioned *Progress and Termination* as the epic poetry of a revolution, but there are hints that he viewed the fall of the ancient Republic as the universal tragedy of human existence.<sup>11</sup> While on different occasions Ferguson narrowed the interest of his narration to more prosaic accounts of 'military and political transactions' that had led to a revolution in the form of the Roman government,<sup>12</sup> he explicitly stated that his aim was to uncover the universal moral and political laws underpinning those events so others 'engaged in transactions any way similar' could form 'models by which they might profit, or from which they may form principles of conduct, derived from experience, and confirmed by examples of the highest authority'.<sup>13</sup> Ferguson acknowledged that this exemplary function was present in poetry as well as in other branches of literature, but he believed that it was fundamentally different in the case of historical narratives. For Ferguson, the moral and political lessons underlining historical events such as the fall of the Roman Republic were grounded in a strict and detailed observation of reality, whereas in poetry the writer was free to embellish his narrative with imagination.<sup>14</sup> For Ferguson history was a reality – a set of circumstances – already *confirmed* by men who shared a *common* nature with their modern counterparts; that was the key aspect of historical narratives and

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selected group of historical figures, such as Cromwell or Milton, to explore the role of some 'great men' in shaping the nation and the historical process. Thomas Carlyle to Jane Ballie Welsh, 28 October, 1882 in *CLO*.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1837).

<sup>10</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'Carlyle's French Revolution' in John Stuart Mill, *Miscellaneous Writings*, John M. Robertson (ed.) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), XX: 132–66.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Ferguson, *The History of The Progress and Termination of The Roman Republic* (5 vols, Edinburgh and London: Bell and Bradfute et al., 1799), I: 4. This analysis focuses on the second edition.

<sup>12</sup> See 'Dedication to The King' in *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 3–4.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Ferguson, 'Of History and Its Appropriate Style' in Vincenzo Merolle (ed.), *The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), 19–20. .

what set them apart from recreational literature and even the natural sciences. Ferguson described history as a narrative in which human experiences were rendered acutely transparent. History was:

The detail of what has actually past: so that the reader may be as nearly as possible in the Condition of an Intelligent Eye & Ear witness of what has passed & be made to know all that he could have perceived understood seen or heard if he had been present & let into every passage as it opened in the course of the transaction.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, while not advocating for an understanding of history as epic poetry, Ferguson essentially proposed that historians should consider their readers as aesthetic witnesses to their literary performances. Conjoining legal terminology with artistic metaphor, he established a relationship between reader and historian which was not unlike that of a theatre crowd watching a performance. In short, in Ferguson's view the historian had to put his readership – providing that they were informed and intelligent – in the position of someone who had 'perceived, understood, seen or heard' what he was accounting for with his narrative. This aesthetic principle went a long way toward traversing the timeline separating the period studied and represented by the author from that which he and his readers inhabited.

In Ferguson's philosophy of history, the historian's task was at once both an aesthetic and a moral one. It entailed creatively refashioning the past with as much detail as possible so that modern audiences could learn 'from principles of conduct' by *observing* the actions of their predecessors. This was an empirically-based, cognitive process similar to the one that Ferguson had formally outlined in different sets of university lectures published during the late 1760s. Ferguson had argued then that humans derive laws of nature – that is, general principles 'collected from facts' – from their observations.<sup>16</sup> Epistemologically, the research and composition of historical narratives was no different from those required in experimental natural philosophy. According to Ferguson, a credible history ought to be grounded upon collections of

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 20. The lack of punctuation and the loose structure of the argumentation reveal the unfinished state of this short essay. Written approximately in 1806 it is, nonetheless, an important source to understand Ferguson's theory of history; particularly, if we taking into account the initial mixed response to *Progress and Termination* and the revisions which followed it.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1769), 3.

observations of real human experiences similar to the way in which a natural philosopher might collect data from their experiments. In Ferguson's words, 'we', humans, 'are determined to believe facts to which we ourselves are witnesses, or to which we have the credible testimony of others'.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the impartiality of historians – and by extension the credibility they needed to convey their exemplary histories successfully – rested on their ability to create narratives that audiences could imaginatively engage with as observers of the events rather than as distant readers. Within this paradigm, the main challenge of the modern historian was how to represent science in a relatable manner without sacrificing its accuracy for literary fame. Decades after Ferguson, Mill would echo the question of representation – with a rhetoric influenced by Friedrich Schiller and other German writers – by claiming that modern readers could learn more from a ballet based on Gibbon's historical works than from *Decline and Fall* itself.<sup>18</sup>

Upon careful examination, it is possible to discern two fundamental elements that shape Ferguson's epistemology in terms of historical practice. The first is political in nature. In *Progress and Termination*, Ferguson narrated a political revolution in a way which, he believed, would be the most useful to those engaged with political and military decision-making during a period of time characterised by political revolutions. To achieve success as a civic educator, the historian or the moral philosopher required an aesthetic sensibility to identify the similarities between two very different periods of time; in Ferguson's case, ancient Rome and the late eighteenth century. It was this scientifically trained sensibility, reliant upon notions of impartial observation, that transformed the historian into a mediator between a narrative about the distant past and the readers who constituted modern civil society. What is more, although fuelled by Baconian insights regarding observation and impartiality, Ferguson's views on scientific epistemology and modern knowledge-production translated into concrete practices for the 'Science of Men'. This fact set him apart from Francis Bacon who, according to Mary Poovey, failed to transform his calls for a new scientific epistemology into an actual code of practice.<sup>19</sup> Ferguson, on

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<sup>17</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy for the Use of Students in the College of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid & J. Bell, 1766), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Mill, 'Carlyle's French Revolution', XX: 136.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 15. Poovey has argued that Bacon focused more on highlighting the stylistic differences of his epistemological proposal from the works of his predecessors. For instance, she notes: 'If [according to Bacon] one could produce systematic knowledge only by reasoning from the phenomena one observed, then it was imperative to know how one

the other hand, argued against the use of metaphor in works of history. We know from his manuscripts and correspondence that Ferguson viewed ornate language as disruptive of the principle of impartiality. For Ferguson, metaphors ‘amplified or diminished’ historical events and thus risked misleading readers, ultimately subverting the scientific nature of the narration. In addition, Ferguson also spoke against frequent authorial interruptions to convey moral and political prescriptions in favour of letting readers infer those for themselves by relying on their critical skills.<sup>20</sup> Although Ferguson did not flesh out a detailed code of practice for the modern historian, from his reflections on the matter we might speculate that he favoured moving historical practice close to the modes used in the natural sciences. These views suggest that Ferguson was concerned with how to make a scientific study of human nature compelling for modern statesmen, rather than with whether or not it was possible to produce scientific knowledge in the field of moral philosophy.

These methodological and stylistic choices underscore the fact that Ferguson approached history as an exemplary or ethical narrative and therefore fundamentally engaged with the state of the political nation. For Ferguson, historical writing ought to benefit the present and not merely offer it a grand narrative with the sole purpose of advancing general knowledge about the past. Ferguson, as did some of his contemporaries, believed that history contained key scientific principles that would allow modern citizens to fuel the progress of the nation and to avoid its political decline; the modern methods of knowledge-production, with their pursuit of impartial observation, were a central feature of this ultimately political project. Hence, when Ferguson argued that historians should transform their audience into eyewitnesses of the past through their narrations, he had moral and political edification in mind and not a form of sentimental recreation. Again, lest the thrust of the argument be misunderstood, it is not being claimed that the narration and characters of *Progress and Termination* lacked sentimental depth. As has already been alluded to above and will be expanded upon later, the sentiments and passions of both characters and readers were crucial as aesthetic elements in

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moved from particulars one saw to knowledge that was sufficiently general to explain things one had yet to see’. According to Mark Salber Phillips, this strategy of highlighting stylistic differences was also used by Carlyle and Mill with regard to the historians of the Enlightenment. See Mark Salber Phillips, ‘Relocating Inwardness: Historical Distance and the Transition from Enlightenment to Romantic Historiography’, *PMLA*, (2003): 436–49.

<sup>20</sup> Ferguson, ‘Of History’, 19–31.

Ferguson's work and pivotal to his ethical method and political message. Yet, they were means to convey a set of normative principles and not the main focus of the narration.

Second, in addition to elucidating practical political insights, Ferguson viewed history writing as subversion of the metanarrative of progress traditionally associated with stadial theory. Scottish contemporaries of Ferguson such as Adam Smith famously assumed a stadial framework to explain socio-economic disparities around the globe; or rather, stadialism was the philosophical theory that, they claimed, resulted from their analyses of the different types of socio-economic modes that could be observed. While in his efforts to produce new systematic knowledge in the field of political economy Adam Smith articulated a four-stage theory of economic progress, Ferguson expressed open reservations about this optimistic framing of history which elevated the post-1707 British state to the standard of commercial civilisation. Instead, Ferguson differentiated between three types of socio-economic existence: savagery, or exchanging goods without a principle of private property; barbarism, exchanging goods according to a principle of private property, but not restrained by law; and politeness, or exchanging goods with a principle of private property that was subject to law.<sup>21</sup> Each stage had its own characteristics, both positive and negative, and thus had the potential to offer different types of valuable lessons to eighteenth-century readers. For the most part, Ferguson tended to combine savagery and barbarism into one category, which he generally described as 'rude' nations. These rude nations, such as the ancient Roman Republic, were then contrasted with 'refined' or polished ones such as modern Britain. However, while Ferguson often associated the latter with the terms 'civilization' and even 'civilized', it is important to note that he nonetheless devoted much of his philosophy to exploring the flaws of those supposedly superior societies. In *Progress and Termination*, effectively a history of the rude ancestors of modern European nations, he showed to his polite audience that in many respects rude nations had been more virtuous than their eighteenth-century counterparts. Indeed, Ferguson aimed to establish a connection between the study of ancient history and the progress of the 'more enlightened nations of the western world'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> As noted by Pocock, in Ferguson's stadial model different stages could co-exist within the same society and no society inevitably progressed into the next theoretical stage. See J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion. Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 330–45.

<sup>22</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, I: 3–4.

As a historian of antiquity writing for readers who viewed themselves as civilised people, even as the epitome of civilisation in some cases, Ferguson was fully aware of his position as a mediator between these two stages: rude and refined. It should not be surprising then that as the narration of *Progress and Termination* unfolded, Ferguson chose to address in a straightforward manner the historical distance separating his subject of study from the reality of his readers. For instance, following his narration of cruelties and bloodshed inflicted by Roman legions during the siege of the Hispanic city Numantia, Ferguson reminded his readership that:

As these particulars, with others of the same kind, strongly mark the defects which subsisted in the supposed laws of war among ancient nations, the reader will probably bear with the shock that is given to his feelings of compassion, for the sake of the picture which it is necessary to give of the manners of the times.<sup>23</sup>

The apologetic tone of the remark expressed Ferguson's self-conscious awareness that unfiltered accounts of ancient modes of warfare might well jolt the sensibilities of his polite readership. Moreover, as a historian with a civic vocation Ferguson had to anticipate that modern readers might have difficulty relating their own experiences to the scenes of cannibalism and brutality that marked the history of Rome if he wanted to have any impact as an author. Any exemplarity that he might have hoped to offer depended on his ability to produce a representation of ancient Rome that was accurate, or at least fulfilled the expectations of historical accuracy with regard to rude societies, and yet was also relatable. It is this tension – between a conception of historical development rooted in a particular interpretation of stadial theory and the demands of a scientific method of knowledge-production – which makes Ferguson's account of the decline of the Roman Republic a work of eighteenth-century scientific history. Moreover, the need to represent this tension in a relatable manner is what makes the piece the universal tragedy of an unintended political revolution. Because Ferguson was not as enamoured – nor as encumbered – with a linear and optimistic view of historical progress, he was well positioned to persuade his readers about the relevance that a narrative concerned with barbarism might have during the modern Age of Revolutions. By employing what might be termed today as a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., I: 336–7.

'reader-friendly' style which balanced any estrangement created by the lived history of rude peoples *with* an affinity for the moral and political sensibilities of his readers, Ferguson empowered those readers to find the lessons of history within the text and to see them as applicable to their own times. The success of Ferguson's historiography rested on his ability to navigate the perceived historical distance that is traditionally assumed to be inherent in works of history.<sup>24</sup> In the process, Ferguson adeptly juggled prevailing notions of progress with the actual historical record – a record that in various and subtle ways raised profound questions about those very notions and thus about the political direction of Britain during of time characterised by its questioning of traditional political models.

In *Progress and Termination* Ferguson used the differences between barbarism and politeness imbedded in a stadial conception of history, between the ancient Roman Republic and late eighteenth-century Britain, to offer the modern reader a universal narrative and a concrete political vocabulary about the nature and demise of civic virtue. In doing this, Ferguson subtly moved towards a professionalization of history writing that, although emotionally engaging and politically oriented, could also claim to be empirical and objective by late eighteenth-century standards. Historians were the necessary mediators between a barbaric past and a refined present, and their works had to capture the general laws that had shaped and would continue to shape, the contemporary political nation. To this purpose, historians selected and arranged the events in the most relatable manner so that critical readers could infer by themselves the normative knowledge underpinning historical experience and apply it to foster the progress of their communities.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> On the notion of historical distance see Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013)

<sup>25</sup> Ferguson never made such a direct claim. Although in his unfinished essay on historical writing there are hints that point in this direction, the humanist perspective from which he approached his work as a historian and moral philosopher prevented him from further developing those ideas. History writing did require a specific set of skills, but there was no plea in his work to professionalize and institutionalize it in order to gain or underpin the social influence that substantiated its exemplary nature. We might speculate that there was never the need for such an argument since as a reputed moral philosopher and firm supporter of the social division in ranks, Ferguson already exercised that pressure by means of private correspondence with prominent figures in Westminster. His letters to Henry Dundas, William Eden, or John Macpherson illustrate the social function that attached to historians of educating and advising the 'statesmen and warriors' of the political community. See Ferguson, *Correspondence, passim*.

This latter exercise – focusing on historical events which were potentially generative of edifying principles – is particularly important for understanding Ferguson's views on the practical value of history. For example, it might explain why, in composing *Progress and Termination*, Ferguson insisted on using the works of classical writers as the dominant source materials. In fact, he openly endorsed and justified this practice in the second edition of the work, despite the criticisms that had followed its original publication concerning his lack of engagement with modern writers.<sup>26</sup> In spite of the clear connections that *Progress and Termination* had with Montesquieu's influential *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, Ferguson only dedicated a passing mention to the French writer at the end of his introductory advertisement. Beyond reviewing the modern value of classical authors, Ferguson used this methodological section to explain that he would only resort to modern authors when in need of aid.<sup>27</sup> We might argue that Ferguson's attitude made it easier for him to present his history as a less filtered narrative, closer to the 'detail of what has actually past'.<sup>28</sup> Equally, it made *Progress and Termination* a more *observable* account of the gradual decline of the Roman Republic. Drawing almost exclusively from ancient authors allowed Ferguson to conceal his authorial voice more effectively and claim that he was depicting what eye-witnesses – or authors more likely to have had access to first-hand accounts – had observed. Throughout, the historian was in charge of polishing and arranging the material in a way which facilitated the audience's discernment of underlying general principles by observing the

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<sup>26</sup> 'The History of the Progress and the Termination of the Roman Republic', *English Review, or, An Abstract of English and Foreign Literature* (March 1783).

<sup>27</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, I: xxiii; for an in depth analysis of the relationship between Montesquieu and Ferguson see Iain McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson and the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1–38.

<sup>28</sup> The determinant criteria that Ferguson followed to select primary sources for the composition of historical works was whether or not they were first-hand accounts. In case they were not, then the criteria was how likely their authors were to have had access to witnesses or to records of faithful testimonies. See Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, I: v–xxv. See also Ferguson, 'Of History', 24–5. In the latter work Ferguson declared that the best kind of historian was 'Perhaps not the Person present & Concerned nor the Professional Man: but a Person observant of human affairs Intelligent and impartial in collecting from the memoirs of those who were present from the Skillful & intelligent in their respective Professions what is peculiarly important in each account of the information required to the general Reader'. We encounter again that subtle support for a particular type of writer of history; while it is not yet a demand for the professionalization of the discipline, it is an endorsement of his work and social position.

actions and motivations of the different characters, characters which – as the narration showed – had sentiments and natural instincts similar to those of modern readers.<sup>29</sup> In practical terms, this gave Ferguson's history a dramatic flair as he often resorted to speeches and dialogues to emphasise particular ideas.

In Ferguson's epistemology, there are thus two cognitive processes which historians must take into account when shaping their narratives: those of the author, and those of the reader. Even though both of them strive to replicate the experiences of eye-witnesses, they are inevitable, yet differently, conditioned by the written text. Whereas the historian analyses primary sources aiming to uncover the philosophical principles that underlay all historical events, the reader engages with a narrative that has already been stripped of all the elements that could distract one from identifying and understanding those principles. The elements are both of content, such as facts not relevant to explain the origin and development of historical events, and form, such as the already mentioned metaphors or ornate language. At the same time, the reader brings to the text a set of perspectives that may or may not be similar to those of the writer, something that the latter must take into account when putting together the narration.

According to Ferguson, the ability of readers to use works such as *Progress and Termination* to their own advantage depended on their capacity to recognize traces of themselves in the actions of those they regarded as savages and barbarians. We might conjecture that this is one of the practical reasons why it was crucial for Ferguson to distance himself from an interpretation of stadialism that implied that rude peoples were in all accounts inferior to polite ones, or that the latter had nothing to learn from the former. Instead, Ferguson's history of the progress and decline of the ancient Roman Republic showed that the main difference between his polite readers and his barbaric characters was historical experience; human nature was universal and remained unchanged. Thus, in Ferguson's epistemological framework an efficacious appropriation of the past entailed the capacity of readers to rely upon their own broader knowledge and experiences if they were to apply the implicit moral and political lessons of history.

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<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, 'Of History', 20. It is worth noting that Ferguson's entire epistemology is based on the assumption that what he defines as 'able writers' would be writing for 'intelligent readers'. If the historian is interested in literary praise or the reader is not educated enough then the exemplary value of history is lost or, possibly worse, misguided.

It has been noted that to facilitate the use of history in his larger moral and political project, Ferguson elevated the history of the ancient Roman Republic to the category of universal tragedy. Although he never stated that narrative history should be understood as tragedy, his representation of the rise and demise of the Roman Republic did constitute an essentially tragic unfolding of events in terms of his own definition of tragedy. In his early anonymous pamphlet *The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered*, Ferguson had defined dramatic tragedy as:

Serious, grave and majestic; it represents the actions of great men, and their conduct chiefly on great and interesting occasions, their struggles in difficult and distressing situations, where the sentiments they express arouse admiration or pity, and where the very faults they commit become so many warnings for the spectator.<sup>30</sup>

Albeit a considerably earlier piece than his history, we can still appreciate the similarities between this interpretation and the opening paragraphs of *Progress and Termination*, where he explains that:

This mighty state [the Roman Republic], remarkable for the smallness of its origin, as well as for the greatness which followed it, has, by the splendour of its national exertions, by the extent of its dominion, by the ability of its councils, or by its internal revolutions and reverses of fortune, ever been a principal object of history to all the more enlightened nations of the western world. To know it well, is to

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<sup>30</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Morality of Stage-plays Seriously Considered* (Edinburgh, 1757), 7. Ferguson confronted this definition with that of comedy, which in turn focused on the 'vices and follies of ordinary men'. While Ferguson acknowledged the exemplary value of comedy and the difficulties of creating good comedic pieces, he also argued that due to its very nature comedy had been more often than tragedy the object of authorial abuse rather than the promoter of civic virtue which it ought to be. Ferguson's ultimate aim with this pamphlet was to defend the exemplary, and therefore moral, value of John Home's tragic play *Douglas* (Edinburgh, 1756), which had been condemned by certain sectors of the Kirk upon its opening in Edinburgh. Ferguson chose to approach the subject from a broad perspective and write a general defence of theatre as a promoter of social virtue and order. It might be argued that his clear separation between tragedy and comedy was a rhetorical effort to separate the aspects of drama that he found more difficult to defend from the religious critique of his opponents. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that this weary attitude towards 'ordinary men' and their histories is also present in *Progress and Termination*, where 'the people' are often portrayed as a mindless crowd guided by demagogues that exalt their passions to advance their own selfish causes.

know mankind; and to have seen our species under the fairest aspect of great ability, integrity, and courage ... As in this revolution [the transformation of the Republic into an Empire] men of the greatest abilities, possessed of every art, and furnished with the most ample resources, were engaged, in opposition, or in concert together, the scene is likely to exhibit what might be thought, in action at least, the utmost range or extent of the human powers.<sup>31</sup>

From the beginning of *Progress and Termination*, Ferguson presented the history of the ancient Roman Republic as an account of mankind's greatest struggle. Ferguson maintained that the revolution that he was depicting had been the work of men of the greatest abilities at the forefront of the most powerful and extraordinary institutions of the political nation. In their actions, readers could recognize the true potential of human nature, for better or for worse. From the virtuous martial-patriotism of Scipio Africanus and Hannibal to the political avarice of Marius or Caesar, Ferguson offered models of conduct for the modern statesman that emphasised the importance of active and continuous political commitment, the notion of civic community, military virtue, and political balance in both domestic and international affairs. Ferguson's narrative both realistically depicted, and simultaneously rejected, the personalization of power, partisanship, and the separation of military and civic dimensions of citizenship.

Although this dramatic tragedy – the intermingling of mankind's greatest abilities and highest aspirations with its lowest and most callous predilections – was the story of a supposedly rude nation, Ferguson believed that the universality of that experience provided him with the sentimental foundations necessary to enhance the formative value of history for a late eighteenth-century audience which was itself an eyewitness to modern political revolutions. After all, as Ferguson claimed in *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792), all peoples – whether rude or refined, Roman or British – manifested a sensibility characteristic of a 'higher species of animal' life.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Ferguson argued that it was that inherent human sensibility, a capacity for 'enjoyment and suffering', that allowed individuals to instinctually distinguish between good and evil in the actions they observed. This capacity enabled them to decide between which examples to follow and which to condemn. It equipped them with the

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<sup>31</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, I: 3–4.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (2 vols, Edinburgh and London: A. Strahan, T. Cadell and W. Creech, 1792), I: 14.

ability to differentiate between sentiments of admiration and sentiments of pity.<sup>33</sup> In Ferguson's words:

The distinction of good and evil originates in the sensibility of intelligent beings to the circumstances in which they are placed, or to the qualities of their own nature. But the application of this distinction, and the course of life to proceed from it, will depend on the associations men have formed, and even of the epithets of good and evil, they are used to bestow on the subjects that occur to their choice. They covet what is reputed profitable, beautiful, or honourable, and shun what is reputed pernicious, vile, or disgraceful.<sup>34</sup>

This is yet another instance in which Ferguson conjectured about the multi-faceted nature of history as the main source for ethical reflection. Men were naturally inclined to develop their morality from the careful observation of the experiences of their contemporaries. The actions of others were what triggered admiration or pity in the observer. Such triggers prompted the observer to formulate moral action guides which, in turn, informed moral judgments. Yet, precisely because moral judgements depended on the particular context in which men were placed they were subject to the vicissitudes of history. For example, Ferguson maintained that 'where merit is limited to arbitrary forms of behaviour, virtue itself will become a principle of formality or superstitious observance'.<sup>35</sup> What was remarkable about Ferguson's thought was that such limitations of merit were as likely to be found in the parlours of politeness as in the forests of the savage.

Because men shared a basic nature despite the ever-changing circumstances inherent to the historical process, in Ferguson's philosophy understanding the past would always be crucial for ethical discernment and therefore for the progress of the political nation. For Ferguson, this was even truer in the case of the Roman Republic, given his belief that ancient Roman actors had exhibited 'the utmost range or extent of the human powers'. The greatest struggle of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., I: 126.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., I: 126–7.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., I: 127. See the articulation of Ferguson's understanding of human nature in Jack Hill, *Adam Ferguson and Ethical Integrity. The Man and His Prescriptions for the Moral Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017). For an alternative perspective on Ferguson's views see Jack Russell Weinstein, 'The Two Adams: Ferguson and Smith's Ideas of Sympathy and Sentiment' in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (eds.), *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 89–106.

mankind had also been the period of its greatest potential, hence Ferguson's affirmation that 'to know it [the history of the Roman Republic] well is to know mankind'.<sup>36</sup> While Ferguson did not develop his theoretical anthropology in *Progress and Termination*, he did outline it in sets of university lectures such as the *Principles*. In his history, this anthropology is presupposed. Ferguson conceived *man* first and foremost as a complex moral agent who develops moral and political capacities through habits and accretions of power that cannot be reduced to either utility or sympathy, as his contemporaries Hume and Smith proposed. Consequently, when Ferguson theorised that the best type of historians were those able to put their readers in the position of eye-witnesses, he was implicitly presupposing sophisticated powers of observation, capacities for foresight, the exercise of moral imagination, and profound social-relational dispositions.

One of the best examples that *Progress and Termination* offers of Ferguson's views on the historical and normative dimensions of human morality is his depiction of the siege and destruction of the city of Carthage, Rome's principal rival. Even though most of the piece focuses on the years of the ascension and fall of Caesar, the outcome of the Punic Wars is what creates the political framework necessary for the final subversion of the republican form of the state under Octavius and the subsequent consolidation of despotism in the Roman Empire. In Ferguson's text, the Roman Senate commands the army led by Scipio Aemilianus to completely destroy the Carthaginian Republic at the end of the Third Punic War. This command marked a stark contrast to the previous policies of the Senate, which were more conciliatory.

Ferguson notes that the command was instigated, in part, by the ominous and emotional discourses of Cato the Elder.<sup>37</sup> Borrowing heavily from the writings of Polybius, Ferguson presented a mourning Scipio in front of the burning ruins of the conquered city.<sup>38</sup> Conjuring the prophecy of the fall of Troy in the midst of Rome's greatest victory, Scipio Aemilianus reminded readers of the ominous fate of the Roman Republic. Through Scipio Ferguson invited his readers to both acknowledge, and imaginatively engage with, their own complicities in the coming demise. In so doing, Ferguson effectively

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<sup>36</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, I: 3–4.

<sup>37</sup> For Cato's speech see *Ibid.*, I: 328–9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 344–5. Ferguson frequently borrowed from ancient historians, such as Polybius, without formally acknowledging them. However, he was clearly self-conscious of the fact that he is proceeding in this manner, and strove accurately to represent the meanings which the historians expressed.

urged them to pay careful attention to the causes of the termination of the Republic that had just begun to unfold. Moreover, to reinforce the prophetic nature of the event Ferguson introduced his own reflections, adding to Scipio's prophecy:

And thus Carthage, the only instance, if Egypt is excluded from Africa, in which the human genius ever appeared greatly distinguished in that quarter of the globe; the model of magnificence, the repository of wealth, and one of the principal states of the ancient world, was no more. The Romans, in the outset of this transaction, incited by national animosity, and an excess of jealousy, formed a design more cruel towards their rival than at first view it appeared to be, and in the execution of it became actors in a scene of horror, which we might suppose to have led them far beyond their original intention. By the milder law and practice of modern nations, we may trust that we are happily exempted from the danger of ever beholding such horrid examples repeated, at least in any part of the western world.<sup>39</sup>

Ferguson's words underscore what perhaps was the most haunting idea that *Progress and Termination* offered eighteenth-century readers: that the demise of the Roman Republic had been the unforeseen consequence of the choices of its citizens and political leaders. Relying on a non-linear narration, Ferguson went on to depict the sieges and destruction of the cities of Numantia and Corinth, stressing the downward spiral of Roman politics across the Mediterranean.<sup>40</sup> The narrative was full of graphic, violent details which Ferguson knew would jolt and horrify modern readers. However, this instance of authorial intervention in the narration risks being misunderstood if interpreted simply at face value or arbitrarily taken out of context. While Ferguson stated that eighteenth-century readers in Western Europe were exempted from the brutalities of ancient warfare, due primarily to the 'milder law and practices of modern nations', such a statement must be read within the larger purview of his overall moral and political project in which refined societies had important lessons to learn from rude ones. Ferguson thought that the practice of law by successive generations, the development of military codes of behaviour, and the overall social progress of modern societies, had made scenes such as the destruction of Carthage by the Roman legion unlikely, if not impossible,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., I: 344.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

in a late eighteenth-century context; the mere passage of time had exposed modern nations to a myriad of historical experiences necessarily different to those that had shaped the ancient Republic.

Nevertheless, the image of the burning ruins of Carthage depicted by Ferguson stood as a timeless testament to the unforeseen dangers that a nation might bring upon itself in the name of progress. In the case of Rome, the disappearance of its rival led to the complete destruction of the international balance of power and to the creation of an overextended territorial empire that amplified the internal problems of the Republic. Ferguson described how Roman leaders and the provincial authorities of ever-growing territories began to accumulate unprecedented amounts of wealth, irreversibly changing the social composition of what once had been a small and mostly egalitarian Republic.<sup>41</sup> As a consequence, metropolis and provinces entered a period of social conflict from which emerged a novel political rhetoric that used the representative institutions of the state to prey upon and subvert the 'power of the people' to advance their own political ambitions. With the Gracchi brothers and their proposals to redistribute the conquered lands amongst war veterans and the increasing number of poor Roman citizens, Ferguson showed his readership the connection between the destruction of a rival and the first subversion of the republican order.

Moreover, the bitter infighting that led to the approval of the Agrarian Laws set the precedent necessary for the emergence of populist military leaders such as Marius and Caesar, who blatantly manipulated the sentiments of the people. The populists' opponents who advocated Senatorial powers such as Sylla began to respond to these threats by increasing the level of violence against their rivals until partisan violence became an integral part of the political process. And thus, by destroying their rival instead of settling for peace, Romans opened the way for the decline of the civic virtue that had defined their political nation.

Although somewhat tangential to this line of argument, it is important to note that Ferguson's admiration for the manners of the ancient Republic, and in particular for the martial patriotism of its early stages, echoed notions popularized decades earlier by the Aberdonian scholar Thomas Blackwell in his influential *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer*.<sup>42</sup> In that work Blackwell had claimed that the Homeric epics were the product of the historical circumstances of the society in which Homer had lived: neither

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., I: 379–80.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London: s.n., 1735).

completely savage, nor advanced by modern standards. According to Blackwell, only in these transitioning societies – which still lacked consolidated socio-political institutions – could one find the vitality, spontaneity, and the overall raw energy, necessary to produce epic poetry of the quality of Homer's, which showed the highest virtues and the lowest vices of human nature in a recognisable way to later audiences. Thus, Blackwell concluded, any attempt to write an epic in a rule-bounded modern community would necessarily fail.<sup>43</sup> It has been argued that the success of James Macpherson's Ossianic poetry was in part due to his ability to adapt the heroes of the oral tradition of Gaelic-speaking Highlands to the taste of modern readers. As noted by Howard Gaskill, while Achilles' mistreatment of Hector's corpse in the *Iliad* could not find a sympathetic audience in late eighteenth-century Britain, the behaviour of Macpherson's melancholic heroes could be warmly embraced in polite social circles.<sup>44</sup>

In *Progress and Termination*, Ferguson resorted to similar rhetorical devices to placate modern sensibilities; for instance, with phraseology such as 'We are happily exempted'. These type of sentences helped him to create a sense of historical detachment necessary to deliver an exemplary narrative to his polite readership. Notwithstanding the fact that these expressions can be seen as formulaic elements characteristic of early-modern writing, on an epistemological level they highlight the nature of Ferguson's approach to knowledge-production and, ultimately, of his views about the civic role of those scientific historians who create knowledge. Ferguson's history, and we might add his philosophy, was dialectic rather than prescriptive. Expressions such as 'We are happily exempted' illustrate that for Ferguson historical exemplarity was not a question of mimesis, of imitating historical precedent, but of critical reflection on the normative principles that historical experience offered. One could, and according to *Progress and Termination* one should, be an admirer of the ancients and learn from them. However, one could not solve modern problems by approaching ancient history in a way that we might characterise as literary. In Ferguson's work, the tragedy of the demise of the Roman Republic gave those engaged in 'transactions any way similar' a model and a vocabulary to debate about the nature of the state, of political revolutions, and of the role of citizens in nations with mixed constitutions; but it did not give them a list of

<sup>43</sup> See Maïke Oergel, *The Return of King Arthur and the Nibelungen: National Myth in Nineteenth-Century English and German Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 97–9.

<sup>44</sup> Howard Gaskill, "'Ossian" Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation', *Comparative Criticism*, 8 (1986), 113–46.

concrete reforms to avoid the political decline of eighteenth-century nations. We might speculate that it was Ferguson's strong commitment to the notion of impartiality in works of science, in this case moral and political science, which limited the prescriptive dimension of *Progress and Termination*. As we have seen, Ferguson thought that there were lessons to be learnt from his narration and he certainly worked to make them clear and relatable for late eighteenth-century readers. Yet, it was in the hands of those readers to deduce them, as it was in the hands of readers to determine the exact turning point during the Roman political revolution in which the once virtuous Republic had given way to a tyrannical Empire.

At the beginning of this article we mentioned that in his review of Thomas Carlyle's history of the French Revolution John Stuart Mill accused the historians of the Enlightenment of not writing histories about 'actual human beings'.<sup>45</sup> Although his accusations were mainly directed towards the histories written by David Hume, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon, Mill's arguments sought to undermine fundamental aspects of the scientific project undertaken by eighteenth-century authors. Salber Phillips has argued that Mill's criticisms were part of an effort to distance the works and needs of their post-French Revolution generation from those of the Enlightenment.<sup>46</sup> Mill believed that the world had irreversibly changed during those decades that separated him from Hume and Robertson, and that as a consequence the people needed a new approach to history. Mill claimed that there was a lack of sentiment in the histories of Hume and Gibbon. He maintained that these historians had made the past dry and remote, that the circumstances of their characters were removed from the daily experiences of nineteenth-century audiences and therefore that their works were no longer relevant in the post-revolutionary political landscape. Yet, Ferguson's performance in *Progress and Termination* suggests that the historiography of the Enlightenment was not as dry and detached from human experiences as Mill had thought. Indeed, Ferguson's work can help us to re-evaluate our views on what science meant for the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment in an eighteenth-century context, especially if Ferguson's history of Rome is not viewed through the prism of nineteenth-century definitions and expectations on how knowledge ought to be produced and represented to be useful for the modern civic community. Ferguson's historical project was both scientific and civic; the success of the former depended on the impartiality of the narration, the latter on its relatability to the

<sup>45</sup> Mill, 'Carlyle's French Revolution', 135.

<sup>46</sup> Salber Phillips, 'Relocating Inwardness', 436–7.

late eighteenth-century experience. With *Progress and Termination*, Ferguson not only sought to create a work of scientific history, but also one written about sensible men for sensible men.

# Census and Sensibility: Quantitative Difference in Ferguson's *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*

Mike Hill

The effects of this irruption constitute a mighty chasm in the transaction from ancient to modern history, and make it difficult to state the transactions and manners of the one, in a way to be read and understood by those whose habits and ideas are taken entirely from the other.

Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783)<sup>1</sup>

Adam Ferguson's magisterial book on the history of Rome described the rise and fall of a society which, in Ferguson's view, represented the pinnacle of Western achievement up until the Enlightenment. Additionally, Ferguson's way of depicting the end of the Republic suggests a connection between what happened to ancient Rome and Britain's uncertain present. This connection, in turn, can be read as bearing an awful truth about modernity's future in the eighteenth century – namely, that modernity appeared to be on the brink of collapsing from its very inception. Eighteenth-century readers might well have been disposed to view turbulent contemporary events – such as the Darien disaster, uprising of the enslaved population in the West Indies, or the American Revolution – as raising the spectre of new Carthages on whatever imperial shore. It is clear throughout *Progress and Termination* – and in many of his other writings – that Ferguson was doing more than simply narrating historical facts. He was intent,

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (New York: J. C. Derby, [1783] 1856), 481.

rather, upon teaching something of a universal lesson. This lesson – which Ferguson believed was already manifest in the eighteenth century – could be summed up as follows: advanced societies tended to indulge in patterns of greedy, luxurious consumption and political corruption which had proven fatal in the past and would likewise be unsustainable in the future. Indeed, Ferguson is not subtle when speaking of his ‘contempt for the lucrative arts’ or when referring to ‘profits and emoluments, which prevailed in former times’.<sup>2</sup> In the *Principles* Ferguson laments that ‘riches ... are a symptom of misery rather than that of happiness’.<sup>3</sup> He reminds the reader that ‘great inequalities of fortune’, like ‘great distinctions of rank’, are ‘fatal to mankind’.<sup>4</sup> While new orders of wealth based on the primacy of self-preservation might – to a certain extent – be celebrated uncritically by the likes of Smith, Ferguson singled out Smith’s ‘law of society’ as insufficiently accountable to his own [Ferguson’s] principle of ‘probity’.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, shifting to a slightly different issue, Ferguson disagreed with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He viewed Rousseau’s idea of a ‘social compact – especially when examined in relation to the most extreme conditions of commercial society – to be a ‘mere fiction’.<sup>6</sup> Against Rousseau, Ferguson exclaimed, ‘If contract be the sole foundation of right, all that is commonly said of an inherent right in every person to defend himself ... must be renounced’.<sup>7</sup> As Ferguson further explained, our dependence on ‘the servile classes’ to make a nation’s wealth is liable – at the same time – to result in the making of ‘a nation of helots’.<sup>8</sup> It is precisely this unhappy part of the historian’s message that Ferguson has in mind when he concludes *Progress and Termination* with the epigram quoted under the title of this chapter. I want to argue that such a message is not about the shared glory between one old and one newer global empire. It is certainly not one designed

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (London: J. Dodsley, 1756). 10. In this connection, what has been called Ferguson’s ‘anti-commercial republicanism’ will serve as a point of departure. On the dangers of commerce in Ferguson, see Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2013), especially chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (2 vols, Edinburgh and London: A Strahan, T. Cadell and W. Creech, 1792), 501.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>5</sup> Ferguson alludes to his qualifications of Smith in *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid, 1773), 108. This was a difference not lost on Marx.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 221.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 186.

to renew a sense of Western historical achievement. Rather, Ferguson is bent on sharing an almost incommunicable foreshadowing of Western progress as it winds its way toward Western self-defeat.

This chapter seeks to explicate that foreshadowing – which was so enigmatically expressed in Ferguson's culminating epigram – by investigating his use of the term 'irruption'. By 'irruption' Ferguson appears to be referring to the advent of a lengthy period of 'barbarism, superstition and ignorance' which ensued between the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of modern nation states.<sup>9</sup> By introducing a conception of history that is fatally marked by such irruption, Ferguson wants to show us something unthinkable for the commercially oriented citizen: social *disorder* as an effect of commercialization. Despite the word 'chasm' in the epigram, Ferguson is not drawing our attention to a simple historical disconnect at the end of *Progress and Termination*. Rather, he is signaling a failure to comprehend what the irruption portends for the future of Western society; namely, its eventual collapse. A coming dictatorship of the rich is not too distant, but rather too close for us to take much notice. With early-modern society organized fundamentally around possessive self-interest, the seeds of its end are already present in its beginning.

The coming 'irruption' constitutes a *manifold* – 'a whole uniting or consisting of many diverse elements' – in Ferguson's work.<sup>10</sup> In order to investigate the intricate nature of this manifold, it is especially useful to speak in the plural form – in terms of 'irruptions' – rather than in terms of a single irruption. In particular, when conceptualizing this manifold as constituted by myriad irruptions, it is possible to discern a paradox that is often overlooked in Ferguson scholarship. The paradox is this: what goes missing in history is as much a matter of absence as it is of overabundance. I hope to show that such a paradox – that is, one that joins multiplicity to absence – is at play wherever we find 'irruptive' forces across Ferguson's wide and varied corpus. We can call this paradoxical absence-as-the-manifold by a whole series of lively eighteenth-century names.<sup>11</sup> Ontologically, terms like 'multitudes', 'majority', 'faction', and 'crowd' or 'mob', are cited so often in Enlightenment discourse that they are ought to be regarded as a founding preoccupation of the period. Epistemologically, the same sense of impasse in the face of the

<sup>9</sup> Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (New York: J. C. Derby, [1783] 1856), 481.

<sup>10</sup> *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, s.v. 'manifold'.

<sup>11</sup> This manifold presents – simultaneously – a number of political, moral and epistemological problems for Ferguson which there is not space here to comment upon.

manifold turns up when theorists turn to 'representation', 'facts', 'words', and 'things'. To find a term that covers both the ontological (socio-political) and epistemological (the discourse pertaining to how the ontological is known) domains in Ferguson, we can use his own keyword: 'numbers'. Like its associate term 'enumeration', 'numbers' is a term used by Ferguson throughout his work. Significantly, he employs it to cover the conundrums of power (social and political phenomena) and knowledge (statements expressive of general principles) in common.

I want to argue that what's at stake in Ferguson's references to, and uses of, 'numbers' is the way in which he puts the *quantitative* (as in counting things, or as pertaining to matters of objectivity) and the *qualitative* (as in human experience, or as pertaining to matters of subjectivity) domains of reality together in a conflicted and even volatile way.<sup>12</sup> To further clarify this distinction, by 'quantitative' I simply mean the so-called *objective* world of empirically observable phenomena which can be counted in a numerical fashion. This includes, for example, the distinctly commercial kinds of objects, such as money, property, and things. It also pertains to the relationships between entities that designate a larger and more empirically available collective order. Furthermore, it denotes a collective order not limited to the wills and desires of the individual *per se*. By 'qualitative', on the other hand, I mean the *subjective* world of human consciousness that claims to transcend, ignore, or compensate for, the essentially infinite (which should not be taken to mean wholly unknowable) nature of the physical world.

I will not be arguing that Ferguson was a materialist, traditionally defined as finding within economic relations of production an ultimate cause for a corresponding social order. To assume this strict sense of causality would be to render all counter-moves to commercial interest impossible, since the counter-move would itself be determined by the relations it presumed to resist. Ferguson's very early use of the term 'superstructure' was utilized specifically to indicate skepticism about 'the mere constructions of speculative men'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This strategy was unique among his more widely read peers, such as Smith, whose ideas about using sympathy to smooth the discordance between the few upper, and the many lower sorts Ferguson disagreed with explicitly. Smith's theory of knowledge as proceeding from the painful encounter of 'surprise' through the more complacent one of 'admiration' is presented in an especially strong way in Adam Smith, 'Of the Nature of that Imitation which Takes Place in What Are Called the Imitative Arts', in W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (eds), *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Indianapolis, 1982), 185.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Remarks on Dr. Price's Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (London: G. Kersey, 1776), 7.

The specific speculation referred to here was the American Revolution, which Ferguson opposed ‘in plain English’ – a clever phrase in the colonial context – in the hopes of underscoring the destructive nature of colonial ‘rapacity’.<sup>14</sup> For Ferguson, historical change is dependent on a multitude of factors, none of which are the privilege of the historical writer to know fully in advance of their coming to really exist. The use of the phrase, ‘plain English’ does not provide absolute assurances about the past or the present or real certainties about future, as those who sought to account for the American (and later, French) revolutions came to realize. On the question of writing, Ferguson was aware that he was part of the pamphlet wars, a ‘fraternity [of] commentators’ he deemed as ‘dull’ as they were numerically vast.<sup>15</sup> He preferred the active life of the Greeks, the ‘living impressions of an active life’, or what he simply called ‘bustle’, over ‘the suggestion of books’.<sup>16</sup> Beneath the ‘practice of real affairs’, he demoted ‘the mere proficiency [of] a student or a scholar’.<sup>17</sup> On the question of historical causality, ‘numbers’ play the same role in a different guise in the form of faction, riot, insurrection; an overabundance of people laying claim to the privileges of citizenry – and for Ferguson, fatally – the spoils of global imperialism.

What I will be arguing is that Ferguson’s take on historical knowledge is different from a traditionally deterministic one, and one perhaps more consistent with what writing of any kind might actually accomplish. It is a common place in eighteenth-century studies that print emerged as a particular form of media technology during the period, and brought with it problems of multiplication and sorting about which Ferguson and his cohort would have been keenly aware. I want to suggest that his interest in ‘numbers’ is a useful place to sort out how he places the ‘bustle’ of real life over the passivity of book learning. This is useful because ‘numbers’ become the stuff of writing in a ‘real’ way in the form of the unprecedented proliferation of printed material in Ferguson’s time. The divide between materiality (quantitative knowledge) and writing (the subjectivist kind) remains enigmatic in Ferguson. Despite the church elder’s more spiritualist turns, his critique of Scholasticism’s movement

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 33, 34, 169. Though I draw different conclusions on what to make of it, there is a good summation of Ferguson’s skepticism about mere book learning in Craig Smith, ‘Adam Ferguson and the Danger of Books’, *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 4 (2006), 93–109. On the same issue, see Gordon Graham, ‘Adam Ferguson as Moral Philosopher’, *Philosophy* (2013), 1–15.

<sup>17</sup> Ferguson, *Essay*, 169.

toward 'monastic retirement' speaks not of a retreat from the work of writing but of a struggle to write and be read given the condition of print's growth as well as its limits.<sup>18</sup>

Ferguson's notion of sociability, if you can call it that, was never far from what he called 'the social war'.<sup>19</sup> To think about society without also considering intra-group conflict is something Ferguson was neither willing nor wanting to do. This is especially true given his pre-occupation with 'the growing disparity of rank'.<sup>20</sup> Ferguson's nine-year involvement in military service as chaplain to the 43<sup>rd</sup> regiment of the Black Watch (1746–54) is one biographical detail that speaks to his endorsement of a counter-weight to riches which he called martial virtue. By this notion (especially in his failed campaign after the Act of Union for an armed Scottish militia) we see a hope for, and fear of, the citizen-soldier. 'We must ... study to inspire them [individuals] with that familiarity and liking to arms', Ferguson writes, 'which will give every single man a confidence'.<sup>21</sup> By 1757, the soldier-scholar-diplomat-church leader (in later life turned country grazier) was also appointed Advocates Librarian thanks to David Hume. However, the pen was not mightier than the sword in Ferguson's view. To think so is perhaps a sign that you are seeking immunity from the 'social war', a status no real citizen should assume.<sup>22</sup> Contrary to conceiving of an inter-subjective zone of communicative reciprocity detached from exigencies of organized violence (Habermas), Ferguson was against the idea of a contractual surrender of martial activities to the sovereign (Hobbes). He explicitly rejected the 'flattened' sympathetic response that capitalist winners ought to have for its losers (for example, Smith's more tepid regard for the sufferer).

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 171. On the tensions between commerce and Ferguson's religious beliefs, see Matthew Arbo, *Political Vanity: Adam Ferguson on the Moral Tensions of Early Capitalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014). This book avoids topics having to do with 'social war' in Ferguson. On the growth and limits of eighteenth-century print, see Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700–1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>19</sup> For more on Ferguson's relation to both Hobbes and Smith, see Iain McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). McDaniel's book is particularly useful for exploring Ferguson's thought in relation to Montesquieu.

<sup>20</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Ferguson *Reflections*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 50. In this regard, Ferguson was not of course referring to women or 'cottagers, day-labourers, and servants'.

In the next part of this essay, I will develop the complimentary roles that existed between war and philosophy as intimated by the long course of Ferguson's life span (1723–1816) and varied career. At this introductory point, I simply want to call attention to the phrase 'social war' to emphasize a 'transaction' (as Ferguson puts it) between the too hastily divided worlds of historical writing and popular force. As I will subsequently elaborate, the phrase 'social war' is simply meant at the outset to suggest that subjects and objects were for Ferguson never adequately (or for that matter, peaceably) balanced given the examples of commercial excess that irritated him greatly. For Ferguson, the interest in getting and spending was fatally susceptible to – or indeed, in its advanced form, dependent upon – both the despotism of the rich and the self-defeating backlash of imperial violence cast 'terminally' as the citizen become multitude.

This is the way in which I want to propose that the *quantitative* and the *qualitative* aspects of social organization and the production of knowledge are neither easily divided nor respectively neutralizing in Ferguson's work. When Ferguson thought about 'science' or 'abstract reasoning', he did so in a specifically nuanced way; to reiterate: 'the proceedings of reason on the mere supposition of *entity*, [and] *quantity*, or *number*'.<sup>23</sup> His interest in numbers was thus explicitly related to matters of kind. This had to do, as we will see, with both the categories of citizenship and the genres of different kinds of eighteenth-century knowledge, whether objective or subjective. He hoped against hope to avoid the *conjectural* part of so-called conjectural history because of a commitment he shared with other Scottish *literati* in empirical understanding.<sup>24</sup> He thus disdained 'the projects of speculative men', a phrase that carried both the connotations of commercial over-reach and of bad historical work.<sup>25</sup> The multitudes and the individual never square; political power and self-interest either collide or produce unholy unions. Even as I have been dividing those worlds – a strategy that I am at this moment employing as a heuristic procedure, but will later discard – objects and subjects only appear

<sup>23</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: A. Kinkaid, 1766), 4.

<sup>24</sup> For a longer discussion of Ferguson's critical stance on 'conjecture', especially in Ferguson's *Essay*, see Mike Hill and Warren Montag, *The Other Adam Smith* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015), chapter 3. On the link between stadial history and Ferguson's indebtedness to Montesquieu, see Dario Castiglione, 'The Origins of Civil Government' in James Harris (ed.) *British Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 491–529.

<sup>25</sup> Ferguson, *Reflections*, 10.

divisible and complimentary if we fail to take into account the way in which Ferguson's evocative use of the word 'numbers' resists that very bi-frication. I will suggest that 'numbers' are as volatile in the social sense (for example, in the tumultuous fall of Rome) as they are epistemically challenging (as in how history must choose among an infinity of facts). If the 'transaction' between the history of Rome's fall and the British Empire's own impending 'termination' is to have an effect, that effect is evoked by the term 'irruption'.<sup>26</sup> My introductory point is worth repeating. It is important to stress that 'irruption' signals a moment of overabundance as much as it does one of absence. Roman society devolves into an imperious and rioting population of plebes. Historical narrative grapples with innumerable facts. Words alone are inadequate do the job of signifying against reality as an infinite mass of things. I will now go on to show that in each of these ways, 'irruption' signals a break in historical continuity as well as the occasion – however likely to be missed – for historical re-connection with the 'termination' of commercial society which was, and perhaps still is, too difficult to admit.

### Devising a 'Method of Multiplying'

Ever since the institution of the census...the enrollment of the people was become a principle object of the executive power ... The magistrate actually took account of the citizen's estate, inquired into his character, and assigned him to his place ... It was the branch of the consular magistracy that the patricians were least willing to ... share with the plebeians.<sup>27</sup>

Ferguson has been described as the Cato of the Enlightenment because of his well-known condemnation of a society fixated on wealth and profit.<sup>28</sup> As Roman censor, however, Cato was also a counter. As Ferguson suggests in reference to Livy within the first pages of *Rome*, 'devis[ing] a method of multiplying' was key to the progress and termination of Rome. The context here is 'devising a method of multiplying commanders' whose numbers 'might be increased at [the proconsul's] discretion' and according to the immediate needs of battle. Nevertheless, diverging from Livy, Ferguson also proposes

<sup>26</sup> Ferguson emphasizes the term 'irruption' in the epigram by repeating it twice.

<sup>27</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> For more on Cato, see Mark Morford, *The Roman Philosophers: From the Time of Cato the Censor to the Death of Marcus Aurelius* (London: Routledge, 2002), 18 ff.

to emphasize the ‘importance of the plebian party’ as inspiring a ‘new’ multiplying method. Here he refers to a reliance upon, and fatal manipulation of, the Roman census. Approaching the republican epoch, this multiplying method superseded a previous way of sorting numbers according to ‘the exigencies of state’ during war.<sup>29</sup> Ferguson notes that it was a good indicator of Roman martial virtue that the desire for glory in the field was stronger than an interest in the ‘power...entrusted with the census’, which a warrior rightly ‘disdained’. Still, as is illustrated in almost every chapter of *Rome*, the new way of counting also suffered from ‘dangerous measures of power’.<sup>30</sup> The ‘patricians were least willing to give it [the census] up’, Ferguson writes early on. This struggle over the new multiplying method is counterbalanced by the action of the plebes, spurred on by ‘the wants of the poor’, their desire precisely not to stay in their ‘assigned place’ among the lower ranks.<sup>31</sup>

In Ferguson’s account, the campaigns of the plebes evolved in the tumultuous direction of populist rule. In the first period of [Rome’s] history, ‘citizens were divided on the distinctions of birth’.<sup>32</sup> In their capacities as patricians or plebes, they strove for prerogatives or privilege’.<sup>33</sup> After the war in Macedonia, a ‘remarkable era ...[,] Romans permitted themselves to be taxed’, and ‘were required at every census to make a return of their effects upon oath’.<sup>34</sup> In ‘addition to [the censor’s right to impose] sumptuary laws, the census...began to be made with more care’.<sup>35</sup> However, ‘in a subsequent period’, Rome was not only ‘glutted with national prosperity’ but also given to an ‘unequal distribution of property...so favorable to the rich...[,] and injur[ious] to the poor’.<sup>36</sup> Here the people ‘entered more fully on competition of individuals and the formation of different factions’.<sup>37</sup> Ferguson adds: ‘the sense of the people on any subject was to raise a riot’ and ‘the multitude [was put] in motion’.<sup>38</sup>

The ‘sense’ referred to here is the one Tiberius encouraged in his capacity not simply as emperor but also, like his predecessor Augustus, as censor. I will

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<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 178, 198.

have more to say about the difference between 'sense' and 'reason' as drivers of historical knowledge at the end of this chapter. For now, what is important to emphasize, as Ferguson does, is that Roman emperors are eventually empowered to 'enroll' the people's numbers.<sup>39</sup> That Tiberius did so badly by raising the poor into a popular party is what doomed him, and eventually, the state. Given an otherwise peaceful division between the 'rich and the poor', he exacerbated that gap by 'multiplying their numbers'.<sup>40</sup> He mobilized 'the animosity of the lower people', already spurred on by the 'spectacle of wealth ... profits ... [and] public shows'.<sup>41</sup> Here again the 'exercise of censorial power' goes wrong.<sup>42</sup> It goes wrong by depending on a method of multiplying that produces a danger Ferguson calls 'perpetual', the past and present effects of 'the [unequal] accession of wealth'.<sup>43</sup> Tiberius rose to power 'surrounded by a numerous [and sycophantic] multitude', but that same 'tumult and faction' finally ends with his murder in the streets.<sup>44</sup>

Leading up to 'the riots of Claudius', Caesar too counted and manipulated 'numbers' in his ill-fated pursuit of imperial expansion.<sup>45</sup> The phrase 'multitudes in motion' denotes a capacity to overcome existing divisions within 'a multiplicity of Cantons' initially 'broken into parties and factions'. And at least for the moment, Caesar-the-censor 'enumerates' them such that 'their numbers' are calculated according to his military goals: 'among the parties, who were already so numerous, and likely to be divided indefinitely by family or personal jealousies, Caesar was about to find the occasions which he undoubtedly sought for'.<sup>46</sup> The occasion is one not only for 'raising his reputation in war' but also for 'enriching himself'. This process of division, re-division, and unification is socially indefensible because it is corrupted by imperial greed.

The narrative thus continues toward the Emperor's and Rome's own demise based on repeated episodes of competition-based faction, a fatal willingness to 'admire the advantages of wealth or of power which were gained at the expense of their [the Romans] country'. Ferguson's example of admiration-gone-bad is – tellingly – linked to the risk of the emperor's

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 166, 117.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 199.

having ‘a numerous list of retainers’.<sup>47</sup> It is the same phenomena of moving multitudes that Caesar manages to do in every appearance. Under his rule, in an otherwise unified and ‘care[fully]’ enumerated tally of the Roman citizenry (recall the census under Cato), ‘the people were extremely irregular and tumultuary’.<sup>48</sup> Since ‘the numbers required to form a *comitium*’ [a legal assembly of the populous] were not fixed, ‘there were great disorders’.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, ‘there were at all times numerous parties who had interest in the continuance’ of such disorders.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, following a difficult census under the populist leader Cinna, ‘social war broke out in Italy’, and ‘multitudes of the new [and Ferguson emphasizes, poorer] citizens took possession of the place of meeting’.<sup>51</sup> At this occasion, Cinna ‘invited the slave[s], under the promise of liberty, to his standard’.<sup>52</sup>

References to this sort of revolt echo the famous scenes of Spartacus, where ‘multitudes of slaves from every quarter flocked to his standard’, and where – like Caesar with better intentions – ‘multitudes were [temporarily] sorted ... into regular bodies’.<sup>53</sup> Even though at this time ‘the people of Italy were ... masters of the known world; it was impossible they could ever meet in a fair and adequate convention’.<sup>54</sup> Rome’s ‘numbers’ in this instance were ‘represented by partial meetings of occasional tumults’.<sup>55</sup> In one typical example, poverty gives way to ‘numbers’ gone fatally wrong: a ‘riotous ... multitude [of] servants’, followers of Clodius, kill Milo in the ‘streets’.<sup>56</sup> A ‘growing scarcity of bread’ gives way to ‘riots’.<sup>57</sup> However, the term ‘numbers’ was not reserved for acts of Spartacan resistance alone. ‘Numbers’ included not only servants, the enslaved plebes, and the poor, but also the newly enumerated, once foreign, now wealth-hoarding Romans. They (like the Americans in Ferguson’s age) were collectively subject to political manipulation based on their greed. Thus ‘the populace of Rome ... tore down the proclamation in which each new tax was imposed’, leading to ‘more riots and danger’.<sup>58</sup> The empire was at its apex and its nadir

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 377.

all at once: too vast and growing too quickly. It was therefore also incapable of finding a 'regular' method for sorting its multiplying numbers into national unity for the long term.

Noting the presence of violence in the earliest manifestations of civil society, Hobbes contended that men are equal to the extent that they are also at war.<sup>59</sup> Once they transition to the property-based establishment of civil society, they exist in a new epoch of (supposedly tranquil) 'inequality'. The early-modern citizen secures his own commercial desires and goods only by surrendering arms to the sovereign – *Leviathan* – who holds a monopoly of state violence. Accordingly, Hobbes posits an absolute historical break between an epoch of war and an epoch of peace in which the citizen voluntarily submits to the state. Hobbes' thesis – that in the course of historical progress 'natural right' is replaced by 'natural law' – is predicated on this division.<sup>60</sup> The 'barbarity of the past', when all goods were held in 'common', gives way to the establishment of private property based on the law of 'contracts'.<sup>61</sup> The age of 'war' (Hobbes has in mind the English civil war) is for once and for all surpassed by the age of 'sovereignty'.<sup>62</sup>

Ferguson, to the contrary, did not hold such an essentialist, linear, and ultimately Whiggish, view of historical periodization, let alone of historical progress. There simply is no imaginary purging of violence from the progress of civilization: 'Even dissention, faction, and civil war have ended in some accommodation to the advantages of liberty and just government'.<sup>63</sup> The writing of *Progress and Termination*, despite the limits of historical reason to which I will return below, is at least potentially also a history of eighteenth-century Britain at one of its most tumultuous times. Ferguson is never shy to conjure Caesar and his kin when speaking about the deleterious effects of British (or American) commercial ambition. More than that, he puts forward very different conclusions than Hobbes on the question of arms. He refuses to make an absolute division between community and martial virtue, between a

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 353–4, 398.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 25–6; 34–5.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 35–46. On Locke's influence on Ferguson's theory of property, as well as for additional comment on Ferguson's difference with the 'contractarians', see Christopher J. Berry, 'The Rise of the Human Sciences' in Aaron Garrett and James A Harris (eds), *Scottish Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 283–321.

<sup>62</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 116

<sup>63</sup> Ferguson, *Reflections*, 2.

‘natural’ state of violent conflict and a ‘civilized’ one of ‘contractual’ harmony. ‘It is absurd...to allege that in any state of mankind all men had equal rights to all things’, Ferguson writes in reference to Hobbes.<sup>64</sup> More importantly, he argues that in every condition of human existence, ‘whether the state of nature, the state of society or convention, as every one had a right to defend himself, so in every [historical period] it would have been wrong to invade that right’.<sup>65</sup> Hostility, defense, and physical actions causing or correcting the perpetuation of economic injustice are not prior to civilization, nor does some imagined Age of Reason erase the ‘social war’. To the contrary, for Ferguson, the notions of ‘war’ and the hopes (as well as fears) evoked by the idea of ‘sociability’ are proximate to one another. More to his point in *Progress and Termination*, they are bound to collide given ‘the effects...of riches in too few hands’.<sup>66</sup>

For my purposes in establishing the central importance of *quantitative* difference to ‘social war’ over the ill-fated *qualitative* presumptions of social harmony in Ferguson, it is essential to contrast Ferguson’s preoccupation with ‘numbers’ with a corresponding keyword in Hobbes, that is, ‘multitudes’. There is no modern English word for Hobbes’ Latin term ‘*multitudo*’, as Hobbes’ translators remind us. Translators are tempted to emphasize the capacity of ‘*multitudo*’ to exceed the more particular (and we should add, the historically minor) categories of citizen, public, or people, by translating it as ‘crowd’ or ‘numbers of men’.<sup>67</sup> However, they rightly also surmise that the term ‘crowd’ has overly negative connotations (which coalesced in Hobbes’ day), while the phrase ‘numbers of men’ insufficiently evokes a necessary sense of force. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne therefore make the point – crucial because it fits so well with Ferguson’s emphasis on ‘numbers’ – that ‘*multitudo*’ is meant as a ‘state of plurality’ contrasted with ‘*unus*’ (unity) or ‘*unio*’ (the one – *Leviathan* – who unifies).<sup>68</sup> ‘*Multitudo*’ is a state of plurality that begs for but ultimately resists the calculations of state underscored by Ferguson (for example, with Cato and Caesar) as the Roman census. This is where his difference with Hobbes – a *quantitative* difference – on the non-distinction between ‘society’ and ‘war’ become clear. Rome’s imperial ambitions introduce problems of scale such that the numbers exceed the state’s ability to assimilate

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<sup>64</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 193.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 437.

<sup>67</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, xl.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., xl.

them. This results in the *terminal* effects of ‘numbers’, the intensification of ‘social war’ under the post-republican, commercial *and* dictatorial, stages of Roman history.

‘Power’, Ferguson writes, originates ‘with the multitude’. Moreover, he continues, ‘they have a right to reclaim it wherever it is abused’.<sup>69</sup> Regarding the relationship between the people and the sovereign power, Ferguson contends that ‘the contract may be broken on either side: if on the side of the sovereign, the power is again that of the multitude, and may be recalled’.<sup>70</sup> In emphasizing Ferguson’s take on the ‘power of the multitude’ within social convention (recall, his difference with Hobbes) I am not suggesting that Ferguson was unconditionally positive about popular force.<sup>71</sup> In one instance, he will admit ‘that the people, in any case, may resist’ yet at other times he observes that ‘the multitude...[is] seized with madness’.<sup>72</sup> Even in this ‘madness’, nevertheless, the conditions that activate the social war are clear: the ‘multitude [are] by wrongs...driven to despair’.<sup>73</sup> In this connection, Hobbes’ more precise Latin terms for the ‘power [that] originates with the multitude’ are helpful in resolving Ferguson’s non-derogatory preoccupation with popular contention. In Hobbes’ original text, ‘*potentia*’ refers to a capacity to use power, which exists both within and without the *socius*, and can break out without legal consent under certain conditions (for Ferguson, of avariciousness or of vast disparities of wealth). ‘*Potestas*’ by contrast is power in an objectified state, as with the sovereign. In contrast to Hobbes, ‘*potentia*’ might be introduced to clarify Ferguson’s point that sovereignty never fully dominates the multitude.<sup>74</sup>

In the conclusion to this essay I will want to say more about the placement, *contra* Hobbes of prioritizing need over law. For now my point is that Rome’s numbers do not add up to Roman social stability in Ferguson’s account. Ferguson states that from the moment of Roman action at the Isthmus of Corinth the Roman soldiers ‘now appeared openly, perhaps for

<sup>69</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 291.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> On Ferguson’s sympathy with ‘bottom up’ forms of government, and his unique appreciation for a ‘disputative, turbulent citizenry’ see Alexander Broadie, ‘Why Should We Read Adam Ferguson Today?’ in Clotilde Prunier (ed.), *Autor de l’Essay on the History of Civil Society d’Adam Ferguson* (Paris: Press Universitaires de Paris Quest, 2014), 15–30.

<sup>72</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 291.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> On mass agency as a philosophical concept, see Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

the first time, in the capacity of conquerors', and, he adds, the 'enlargement of possessions [were] already too great'.<sup>75</sup> Keeping the search for a 'method of multiplying' in mind, he calls a would-be geo-political matter (rather enigmatically for modern readers) a problem of 'continual addition'.<sup>76</sup> Given the empire's global hunt for riches – its 'avarice', its 'growing security of riches' – 'slaves become masters...[.] a turbulent populace...revolts'.<sup>77</sup> What were merely 'revolts on the frontier provinces' lead to 'general revolt...[that were] at last fatal to the sovereignty of Rome'.<sup>78</sup> What *Progress and Termination* finally depicts is a 'method of multiplying' tragically unable to fulfill the 'enumerator [s]' task.

It is worth noting that the words 'number' or 'numbers' are used 220 times in *Progress and Termination*, almost twice as much as the term 'citizen,' whereas 'people', which is sometimes used in Ferguson to connote all ranks of Romans, is used 355 times. The reader may recall my earlier reference to the battle between patricians and plebes regarding how the census was to be conducted. The Plebeians worked hard to gain 'admission of a certain number of their orders to fill up the senate'.<sup>79</sup> As Ferguson describes the situation, 'the plebes, who aspired to this distinction [being in the college of the tribunes], and the patricians, who were jealous of it, conspired to augment their numbers'.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, 'Cassius...complained...to the inferior classes...[about] the property of persons who were already too rich...[.] and by this...appeared to have the advantages of numbers on his side'.<sup>81</sup> I could go on. My point is simply that it is 'numbers' that provide the pivotal points of historical agency in Ferguson's *Progress and Termination*. 'The office of censor' in Rome's republican period 'was become too important for either party to entrust it'.<sup>82</sup>

Having displaced the patrician's former role as enroller of the people, Rome's emperors-as-censors became 'the fountain of honor...[who] could pry into every citizen's private life, and could promote or degrade every person who courted his favor'.<sup>83</sup> They 'gave out the numbers of senators' and they 'made up the new roles of the people...who were entitled to become

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<sup>75</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 85.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 86, 90, 92.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 419.

Roman citizens'.<sup>84</sup> Not the reasonable and politically disinterested Cato but the ambitious, quasi-populist Caesar finally wins the all-important power 'to enumerate'.<sup>85</sup> Like all the other tragic hero-villains in Ferguson's *Rome*, Caesar thus 'abuses...factions...in order to increase the number of their partisans' on his side; and for him 'great numbers pined under want of consideration to which they thought themselves born'.<sup>86</sup> To say again, 'the superiority of numbers [can turn] into disorder and weakness'.<sup>87</sup> 'The power of the...people', Ferguson remarks in his response to Dr. Richard Price, 'is not the good of the people'.<sup>88</sup> Rather than concluding out of context that this is a simple example of Ferguson's so-called 'conservatism' (the term is historically meaningless), the power to which he refers is in this instance, and again, 'the multitude... the population of Italy...swell[ing to the point of]...tumult'.<sup>89</sup> As the term 'swell' suggests, at issue here is a fatal form of 'addition', the end of 'liberty' given the circumstances of rampant self-interest and imperial greed. Therefore, 'in this period', Ferguson writes, 'was born ... those persons whose conduct was now to determine the fate of the republic'.<sup>90</sup>

My reason for giving this long list of citations on 'numbers' is that the centrality of the census and Ferguson's frequent use of the term 'multitudes' illuminates the question of 'irruption' we started with, as regards Ferguson's skepticism about the historian's task. We will soon see that this skepticism is based on the problems of 'enumeration', only this time 'numbers' are epistemically oriented. Ferguson complains mightily that Rome's post-republican phase exhibits censorial abuse, not so much subjectivity gone wrong as – to say again – a fatal quantitative problem: 'the rolls of the people [become] too numerous to meet in any one body...In what divisions', he asks, 'are they to act?'<sup>91</sup> The answer Ferguson offers is a tragically paradoxical one: no division, and because no division, no unity; no nation. Or to put this more precisely, numbers have reached an enumerable point. The social categories necessary to turn Hobbes' *multitudo* into *unus* change on account of the incapacity to perform a precise count. This is not to say that such a 'numbers' event exists in a state of inactivity. To the contrary, the drama played out in

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 429, 128.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 199 (emphasis mine), 311.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 313, 321.

<sup>87</sup> Ferguson, *Reflections*, 57.

<sup>88</sup> Ferguson, *Remarks*, 52.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 146.

<sup>91</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 471.

Ferguson's *Progress and Termination* is one where the activity of 'numbers' is so active that traditional categories of national belonging no longer hold. A founding problem for Ferguson in the history of the human being *per se* is that 'men exist in greater numbers than any other species of animal'.<sup>92</sup> Yet 'the value of numbers is proportioned to their union and character'.<sup>93</sup> This is because the body of man is itself hard wired for war: 'the hand and arm of a man is an instrument and a weapon'.<sup>94</sup> The problem of 'states overgrown' as we have seen in the case of imperial Rome, is that 'great numbers...are exposed to corruption [and therefore] become profligate, licentious, seditious, and incapable of public affections'.<sup>95</sup> The rule of law is thereby displaced by the 'rights of the multitude', which, *pace* Hobbes, never fully nor finally surrenders to the Leviathan's pacifying grip.<sup>96</sup> For Ferguson, the people's 'force' becomes the 'sedition...[of] great numbers' if they are not 'combined for service of the state'.<sup>97</sup> In the course of *Progress and Termination*, the 'force' of 'numbers' finally exceeds the ability of the sovereign to sort, assimilate, and therefore canalize it for 'the principle object in every state [which is] commerce...[and] war'.<sup>98</sup>

As I mentioned, there is more about the tension between need and law in Ferguson, especially insofar as it relates the divisions of 'numbers' by genre. For now, in order to transition to the final part of the argument, I will simply repeat the three lessons I have offered about Ferguson and 'numbers' so far: (1) categories are permeable and dependent on scale; (2) scale and category interact in a way that either pretends to maintain, or eventually dissolves or re-configures, what we traditionally understand as a coherent group; (3) the changes that numbers bring to category are therefore neither permanent nor not predetermined, but instead, tend to come about in surprising ways. In short, the progress of knowledge, like popular contention, moves against consensus, habit and expectation, and according to a dynamics of numbers that behave in remarkably consistent ways across epistemic and social domains.

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<sup>92</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 23.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 243, 240.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>96</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 472.

<sup>97</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 244.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

## Paper-Wars: Reason, Enumeration, Media

The reasoner is everywhere surrounded with precipices. If he maintains, that the people, in every case, should obey, he delivers over the subject to be oppressed and injured at discretion ... He [the reasoner] need not recur to any maxim of law for this purpose: the power of necessity is superior to the law; and the instinct of nature drives to its end, with a force which speculative maxims can neither withstand nor direct.<sup>99</sup>

The second part of Ferguson's epigram on the limits of historical writing is occasion for further reflection on his skepticism about 'reason[ing]'. Where we had an epistemic 'chasm' in the first epigram, here we have an ontological 'precipice'. My hope in closing is to build something out of Ferguson's caveats that will allow us to bridge the gap between thought and action, and thereby, close a distance that never really existed in Ferguson between what he called 'paper wars' and 'social wars'.<sup>100</sup> This is something we can surmise because in his work that distance is less wide than it is in kindred texts (for example, Adam Smith's, *Wealth of Nations* of 1776). The key issues in this epigram are not simply that Ferguson is less than satisfied with mere reason (or as he more often says, conjecture), or mere speculation. Rather, and more importantly, his dissatisfaction can be expressed in the following two ways. First, it is linked to the primacy of a conflict of 'numbers' under conditions of grave inequality. Second, the same call for 'enumeration' in such conditions is evoked in the social as well the epistemological – specifically, the written – domains.

Ferguson is unique among his peers in raising need above the law. At the same time, he is saying that 'speculative maxims' – those of historians and legislators alike – are not up to the job of transcending what he calls the 'the instinct of nature'. Recall again how Ferguson, one might say, 'out-Hobbesses Hobbes'. As we have seen, he retains the power of the '*multitudo*' within the – at best precarious – epoch(s) of commercial society. 'Sovereignty is lodged in the multitude', and he continues: 'when we bring these words to the test of any rational application, they amount to no more than this...that everyone has the right to dispose of himself, so far as it is consistent with the safety of others'.<sup>101</sup> What is uniquely clear in Ferguson is that, under conditions where

<sup>99</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 291–2.

<sup>100</sup> On print culture in Ferguson's Scotland, see David Allan, *Making British Culture: English Readers and the Scottish Enlightenment, 1740–1830* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>101</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 290.

a few 'hoard up riches' while too large a number exist in a state of privation, 'safety' extends to justifiable acts of property redistribution that 'revolts' against the law: 'It may be more difficult still to restrain a theft committed for the relief of a perishing family, than one committed for the supply of personal want; yet human nature must revolt at the supposed application of strict law in such cases...; extreme necessity of one person may so far supersede the right of another'.<sup>102</sup> In the same section of *Principles* that posits need over law, the poor 'reasoner' runs into the limits of reason because reasoning about power is not exactly a retreat from power but it is a different dynamic of it. We see in Ferguson at this point not only an expected reticence to go on reasoning as usual but also a qualified surrender to the 'numbers' problem. I will explain what I mean by *qualified* quantification in a moment. For now, here are some important references to the problems of 'words' and 'numbers' that are apposite to the problem of Caesar's 'enumeration[s]' in Rome.

In the section of *Principles* on the superiority of need over law, which again, only underscores the power of the multitudes as a permanent political problem of commercial society, Ferguson is questioning the efficacy of 'words' as an enigma of quantification. Attempts to counter 'despotism...have perplexed the most ingenious minds, or have sometimes suggested a doctrine which can scarcely be applied beyond the form of words'; 'such maxims in speculation cost nothing but the words in which to express them'.<sup>103</sup> Such maxims, in other *words*, 'cost' very little. Here, too, at the level of writing and language, we are confronted with the search for a 'method to multiply'.<sup>104</sup> Ferguson's theory of language is quantitative at its core. While it may be 'divided...into signs, speech and written characters', the language develops 'by...adding to the stock of instinctive or natural signs', eventually 'arriving at a multiplicity of stores'; but 'nice discrimination, in numberless parts [creates] difficulties for the grammarian'.<sup>105</sup> While we can 'create a catalogue of signs', by 'multiplying words [we can also] create an infinite variety of thoughts'.<sup>106</sup>

The issues we have been repeating – of numbers, category, and scale – are repeated again as Ferguson reflects on his own public writing. While Ferguson remarks that 'the Public is entitled to have the fairest construction of his [Dr

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 51, 296.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>104</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 23.

<sup>105</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 39.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Price's] words' in his reply to Price's support of American independence, he characteristically also fears 'the [folly of] the populace'.<sup>107</sup> 'Popular assemblies', as we have seen with Rome, are 'unstable', liable to the misleading and 'inequitable' influences of 'critics and orators'.<sup>108</sup> The point here about the 'method to multiply' is less a social than an epistemological one; or better, it is the same point for both problems.<sup>109</sup> Ferguson is concerned with the course of 'this [his and Price's] paper-war' on two accounts. The first is its unknown effect on 'popular assembly' become 'the licentious multitude'. The second is that writing itself is at war with other writing on account of a quantitative challenge all its own.<sup>110</sup> Ferguson thus dreads the necessity of having 'become the author of a pamphlet', as I have mentioned already, because he 'know[s] not how the tenets of any party may be affected by what I write'.<sup>111</sup> Ferguson continues with an ironic tone of self-mockery: 'I beg of you to remember, that we pamphlet-writers of every condition mistake ourselves as statesman, and so decide and advise without self reserve... Our esteem with many has fallen'.<sup>112</sup> In a pamphlet he penned supporting a people's militia, Ferguson refers to 'impartiality' as 'a doubtful virtue... when the cause of our country it at stake'.<sup>113</sup> That statement is as much one about politics as it is about communication. Both force the eighteenth-century citizen *qua* reader to find 'a method of multiplying'.<sup>114</sup>

Now we can ask a final question: does Ferguson figure this 'method' out? I have argued that throughout his writing Ferguson is preoccupied with 'numbers'. I have also tried to show how 'numbers' denote in common both a social and an epistemological problem – both dependent for a solution on the management of scale, and thereby the establishment of categories that are negotiable in relation to the way numbers add up over time. In other words, 'every society... [can be] infinitely varied in the multiplicity of forms', to repeat a familiar Fergusonian premise.<sup>115</sup> 'Yet every step', he continues, 'that is made, in the concourse of numbers, tends to convention'.<sup>116</sup> Finally, 'our object... is

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<sup>107</sup> Ferguson, *Remarks*, 1, 7.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>109</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 23.

<sup>110</sup> Ferguson, *Remarks*, 15.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>113</sup> Ferguson, *Reflections Previous*, 58.

<sup>114</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 23.

<sup>115</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 270.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

to enumerate, in general terms, the principle parties of which every political society consists'.<sup>117</sup> The important relationship between the application of generic principles and the application of moral principles should by this time be clear. The conflict between law and need rests in Ferguson's acceptance of flouting the reason of state, and therefore, of becoming something other than an identifiable member of the nation. This is to say, you become at that moment of need part of what the census cannot enumerate. You become one of the Hobbesian '*multitude*', which turns out not to have given up on achieving equality in great numbers, after all.

Thus, the ultimate truth about *quantitative* difference in Ferguson is that the 'numbers' eventually win; but again, in a *qualified* and – I want now to emphasize – an ambivalent way. I say ambivalent for two reasons. First, Ferguson employs subjective rhetorical strategies, ones that engage what he will call, perhaps with Francis Hutcheson in mind, the 'passions' or 'affections'. Second, while Ferguson offers a critical assessment of 'the conditions of men [being] extremely unequal', he finally appeals to something on the order of Jupiter's invisible hand to insure that the working poor exist peaceably in their station.<sup>118</sup> 'Possession or privation depend on circumstances which mankind cannot command', Ferguson writes.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, 'happi[ness] or misery [exists] not in proportion to the measure in which they possess or are deprived of external advantages, but in proportion to their own minds...and the use of the means which they are furnished by providence'.<sup>120</sup> Ferguson's preoccupation with 'enumeration', 'extern[ality]', 'measure[ment]' – in short, empirical data – is clear. However, we see here instead a move toward immeasurability, subjectivity, the soul, God's transcendent and occulted plan (none of which the pagan Romans had but all of which Britain's poor might use for self-restraint). Ferguson appears to be suggesting that it is not a good idea to 'measure' how external advantages are possessed, although such a suggestion might well contradict an earlier 'method to multiply'.<sup>121</sup> Instead, Ferguson seems to be intimating: go inward where deep thinking and abstraction live. Whatever issues you may have with the material world now become a question of the soul, an immaterial question, and one for which there cannot be an answer in this less consequential bodily life.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 32

Consequently, Ferguson's comments are illuminating on the distinction between 'matter' and 'mind'. 'Matter is divisible and inert', and we can add, therefore enumerable. 'Mind is indivisible and active', and is what creates the ideals of generic wholeness out of an infinite variety of things and events.<sup>122</sup> As Ferguson stated in his earlier lecture notes, 'the properties of mind have no analogy to those of matter'.<sup>123</sup> Ferguson finally resolves the 'numbers' problem by dividing a 'bodily' realm from that of the 'soul'.<sup>124</sup> In this salvo of citations that conjure up 'the immateriality of the soul', other worldly abstraction provides generic unity where there would otherwise be mere multiplicity.<sup>125</sup> This multiplicity can be read variously in Ferguson as the infinitude of historical data – or commonly – as 'social-war'. However, it is at last a qualitative answer to the exigencies of quantification.

In order to underscore this final point about Ferguson's qualification of quantitative difference, the question about his putting human need above the law is best approached as a matter of *how* that message arrives – or better, the *way* by which it arrives – than simply *what* it is. It arrives subjectively, and is dependent on imaginative work. Where 'enumeration' ends, 'imagination' begins. Ferguson writes, 'the imagination...may be termed the faculty of particularization, [whereas] abstraction may be termed the faculty of generalization'.<sup>126</sup> 'In the imagination', he continues, 'we would state our subject with all its qualities and circumstances, and a plurality of subjects, in respect to all their relations of similitude, analogy, or opposition'.<sup>127</sup> The status of this plurality is impossible to realize as a state of generic wholeness, which is why it cannot be enumerated by the sorting faculties as such. We can now see that the terms 'imagination', 'feeling', 'passion', and 'affect' are crucial capacities for receiving messages that emphasize need over law, and in ways that lead to real action. When 'numerous assemblies' are too 'numerous', Ferguson calls them 'apt to passion'; and therefore, apt to 'discord and war'.<sup>128</sup> As in the case of the American 'experiment', 'communities [are] threaten[ed] ...with a pretense for separation, or a fancy, to set up for

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<sup>122</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 111. For further discussion of Ferguson's endorsement of pleasures of the mind over those of the body, see Katherine Nicolai, 'Adam Ferguson's Pedagogy and his Engagement with Stoicism', *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 12 (2014), 199–212.

<sup>123</sup> Ferguson, *Analysis of Pneumatics*, 7.

<sup>124</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 110.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>126</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 114.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 478, 410.

itself'.<sup>129</sup> On the problem of 'numbers' without genres, Ferguson cautions, 'passion is greatly diversified in the case of different subjects and objects'.<sup>130</sup> Note too that in a sermon to the Highland regiment, Ferguson draws mightily on the use of 'parable' in the 'writing of the apostles', namely, those scriptures concerning 'the Army of Israel'.<sup>131</sup> Ferguson writes affirmatively of the need to search for 'foundation in scripture', and not always – as is the case in this sermon – for peaceful ends.<sup>132</sup> Accordingly, he encouraged his troops to become 'keepers of ... oracles, the blessed effects of which deliverance and establishment you now feel'.<sup>133</sup> 'Feeling' here is not just a state of martial virtue in its soon to be victorious moment. It is also a state of incalculable uniqueness: 'imagination [is] amuse[d] by the new and the strange'.<sup>134</sup>

The most explicit example of what we might call both a form of civil-resistance and an aesthetic turn in Ferguson, is the story he tells of the starving orphan 'found almost naked, lying on the grave of his parent of whom he had been recently deprived'.<sup>135</sup> He continues:

the person who found him, we shall suppose, was passing to an appointment, at which he was about to discharge a debt. Will any one reprobate this act of humanity, as interfering with a matter of more perfect obligation? Even the courts of law, as we have had occasion to observe, can admit the extreme necessity of one person as valid to suspend the right of another.<sup>136</sup>

The 'perfect obligation' that we can only 'suppose' to have existed is 'humane', but is also – we should say again – 'irruptive'. It breaks a monetary contract to participate in a more pressing and important obligation. This keeps the person who accidentally found the orphan from his appointment with the creditor. This unanticipated swerve away from the money obligation is also, as Ferguson is careful to point out, entirely illegal. He continues: 'A person

<sup>129</sup> Ferguson, *Remarks*, 4.

<sup>130</sup> Ferguson, *Analysis of Pneumatics*, 21.

<sup>131</sup> Adam Ferguson, *A Sermon Preached in the Ersh Language to his Majesty's First Highland Regiment of Foot* (London, A. Millar: 1746), 5.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>134</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 5.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 317. On Ferguson's aesthetics, see Robin Dix, 'Ferguson's Aesthetics' in Vincenzo Merolle (ed.), *The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), lxxvi-lxxvii.

<sup>136</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 317.

about to perish for want of food is allowed to save himself by recourse to the property of another; and the plea of humanity is held to be more sacred than that of an absolute and exclusive right. Why should not humanity therefore be enforced'.<sup>137</sup> Three points are apparent from this: (a) Ferguson seems to be suggesting that under conditions of gross inequality, 'human[e]' existence is only conceivable as act of 'social war'; (b) like war, such action does not follow the a pre-planned course of behavior. The orphan scene interrupts an earlier form of reciprocity, the commercial and the social contract. It is in this fortuitous encounter, not a matter of habit but one of chance, that we gather the force necessary to 'suspend the [property] rights of another'; and (c) the 'medium' (his term) for thinking ethically (and acting illegally) is now become an 'imaginative' one. There is a qualified encounter with the pressures of quantity in this. The historian turns to fictional stories – and not the habitually generalizing faculties of the mere 'reasoner' – in his recognition of the poor. It is consistent that genre and law go together in this way, just as history turns increasingly in the eighteenth century toward what we now cordon off in the literary domain as the sentimental novel.

Nevertheless, in the same way that laws of property can and at times should be broken, eighteenth-century genres can be seen, perhaps, should always be seen, in terms of combinations of features that are subject to unexpected forms of re-calculation. For example, while Ferguson defends the stage play, *Douglas* by John Home, for its ability to elicit 'compassion...[and] move[ment] for the innocent sufferer', the kind of work to which the play belongs is variously put under the headings of 'story, parable or fable ... [.] affecting story', and 'history'.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, Ferguson applies aesthetic principles of judgment to 'historical' discourses in this instance without hesitation: 'the remaining part of this history [he is comparing *Douglas* to the Apostle Paul's account of the suffering Joseph], is very beautiful and we cannot help considering it'.<sup>139</sup> On the one hand, Ferguson hedges in his defense of *Douglas*, cautioning against poor relief for the idle, and appeals to the plan of 'Providence...[for] the wis[dom] of plac[ing] men in different stations, and bestow[ing] upon them different degrees of wealth'.<sup>140</sup> On the other hand, the mere 'reasoner' cannot act on behalf of the poor by facts alone so is moved to 'tears' by the 'affecting story'. That, as I have mentioned, is the aleatory nature of 'numbers'. From here a

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>138</sup> Adam Ferguson, *The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered* (Edinburgh: 1757) 8, 9.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 24.

movement may (or may not) be literalized in the form of a 'social war' of need against the law of property. By turning to qualitative ways to solve what begin as quantitative problems, Ferguson's writing reveals a key tension between subjectivity and multitudes at a moment where 'matter' and 'mind' are moving ever farther apart.

There is one more important hint about eighteenth-century thought on the difference of numbers, which we can now properly call *technical* one. When Ferguson writes, as we might expect, about 'the history of mind', he evokes the problem of 'a multiplicity and succession of particular operations ... [ideally] placed in a comprehensible order, under generic or specific names'.<sup>141</sup> 'Numbers' become intelligible by genre, and they reach a point of unintelligibility when multitudes exceed habitual forms of categorization. This is the 'irruption' we have been tracing, 'social wars' and 'paper wars' alike. Most interesting for my purposes is the name he gives this mechanism for creating the categories themselves as they change over time: genre is 'obtained by some medium ... or means different from that of the mere attention to the subject itself'.<sup>142</sup> I take the term 'means' and 'medium' in the literal sense to extend to media, which in Ferguson's day would have connected to the unprecedented circulation of print that so bothers and inspired him under the heading of the 'paper-wars'.<sup>143</sup>

Bacon was an appropriate inspiration for Ferguson's commitment to empiricism, which as we've seen is sometimes supplemented in crucial ways with more imaginative modes of writing and performance. As a concern common to both Bacon and Ferguson, the importance of what the former simply calls 'tools' or even 'machines', is key to the 'method of multiplying'.<sup>144</sup> A hundred years and more prior to Ferguson, Bacon also posits a new experimental approach to 'the subtlety of things'.<sup>145</sup> In opposing the 'consensus' of scholastic thought, he writes: 'no one should be afraid of multiplicity'.<sup>146</sup> Whether Ferguson is afraid of 'numbers' is of less interest than the fundamental importance he gives them across the wide spectrum of his work. Do not 'be afraid of multiplicity',

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<sup>141</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 64.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>143</sup> For elaboration on the term 'mediation' and its use for defining the Enlightenment, see Clifford Siskin and William Warner (eds), *This is Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), especially 1–33.

<sup>144</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1620] 2000), 28; 33.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

Bacon continues, because ‘a mass of things’ are knowable, they are just not knowable if you use the wrong tools, and they are not knowable in advance of the experiment itself. ‘Masses’ are, in this sense, ‘irruptive’. To once again evoke Hobbes, the agency of the ‘*multitudo*’ is not predicated on prediction but on ‘*potentia*’, calculable (or as the case may be, incalculable) episodes of chance. While ‘simple enumeration is a childish thing’, according to Bacon, it is only so because events are accounted for ‘merely on available instances’.<sup>147</sup> He is, in other words, decidedly skeptical about the too limited scale of mere human recollection, ‘as if one expected to be able to memorize and master the calculations of an account book’.<sup>148</sup> It is as if Bacon is there both behind and ahead of the historical curve of the digital humanities, waiting for better memory machines, better tools for calculations.

So too is Ferguson. For him the ‘chain of communication’ is dependent on the ‘medium through which individuals give and receive intimation of their meaning’.<sup>149</sup> His medium was print, which was newly massive. That bothered him in precisely the way citizens became bothersome in Rome. Ferguson’s epistemology and his politics are enumeration-dependent: ‘man’s associating nature require[s]...enumeration’. ‘Consciousness’ itself depends on ‘multiplying...sentences [with personal pronouns, like ‘I’]’; and in doing so, being able to both ‘enumerate particulars, [and] proceed to generalize’.<sup>150</sup> ‘We...enumerate’ in consort with our genre-making faculties to achieve our ‘intelligent power’.<sup>151</sup> Yet, like Bacon’s skepticism about mere human memory, to ‘account for ultimate facts [is a] vain desire’; ‘to require proof a priori for every fact were to suppose that human knowledge requires an infinite series of fact and explanations, which is impossible’.<sup>152</sup> ‘Facts are pretended not as discoveries, but as data’, Ferguson writes.<sup>153</sup> Scale, quantity, category, and in addition, time: these are what determine new and useful knowledge for Ferguson within the Baconian tradition.

But what about the changing of media? What about the machines for genre-making that came with the dawn of the ‘experiment’? What about the ‘tools’ for handling what would be without them immeasurable amounts of ‘data’? Ferguson presents the problem: “Thoughts multiply, and knowledge extends,

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>149</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 315.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>152</sup> Ferguson, *Institutes*, 9.

<sup>153</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, 10

without any increase of bulk or change in place or figure'.<sup>154</sup> It is an idea that finally leads him in a qualitative direction, that is, toward subjective ways of solving quantitative problems. Perhaps that is because he is bound to print-media, and like Bacon, is limited by eighteenth-century 'tools'. 'The microscope has not yet made us acquainted with the structure of [the body's] parts'.<sup>155</sup> Not *yet*? What Ferguson's preoccupation with quantitative difference seems to portend – out of sorts with his own time, perhaps – is a time when we will not have to ask who is writing, acting, or having which kind of experience, but instead ask how many.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 66.

## ‘People Who Live Long Like Me Must Be Content To Be The Last’: Multiple Fergusons Beyond *The Essay*

David Allan

On 23 March 1795 Adam Ferguson wrote from Edinburgh to his great confidant Sir John Macpherson. After a distressing description of the condition of his ailing wife came a note that their mutual friend Joseph Black was fading fast.<sup>1</sup> Then, having also recorded the death of Hugh Blair’s wife just six weeks earlier, Ferguson turned to his own state, reporting the following:

But people who live long like me must be Content to be the last. Of my Books I would rather work on Philosophy than Roman History to which I have little heart in the present State of the world although it is that to which the bookselling trade directs my attention.

In Philosophy I should be doing what I am more likely to continue when I quit this scene of things. But the truth is I do little of any thing & expect no Attention if I were to do more.<sup>2</sup>

Ferguson’s letter to Macpherson evidently catches him at something of a low ebb, and it would clearly be hard to blame him. Indeed, a terse note added to the letter confirms the death of Katharine Ferguson only an hour after his account of her illness was first drafted out (though Black, it turned out more happily, would eventually recover from consumption and survive for nearly another six years).

This is obviously Ferguson writing in bleak circumstances, beset by dark thoughts about the continual erosion of his own close circle through illness

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson to Macpherson in Vincenzo Merolle (ed.), *The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson* (2 vols.; London: Pickering and Chatto, 1995), II: 361. Ferguson added that in his judgment ‘neither is it likely will long Survive the Other.’

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., II: 361.

and death, feeling isolated and increasingly destined to be solitary as he survived unscathed the passing of so many of those on whose company and sustenance he had relied. As Ferguson writes in the same letter, evidently struck by his own singularity, 'Many old people have died but I am yet as well as you saw me'.<sup>3</sup> Despite his understandable preoccupations with health and mortality at this moment of personal crisis, we also hear, albeit with strongly pessimistic undertones, Ferguson's analysis of his intellectual condition nearly thirty years after the publication of *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. This is worth reflecting upon for two reasons. One is that it is a useful reminder that Ferguson lived long enough to develop significant perspective on his own scholarship (and he would long outlast Mrs Ferguson: though the melancholy air of the letter provides no hint of what he could not then have known).<sup>4</sup> It is also intriguing, to put it no more strongly, that in such an affectingly intimate communication about sickness and dying Ferguson suddenly digresses wildly and switches to talking to Macpherson about his activities as a writer. It is almost as though other people are private individuals with afflictions and terminal illnesses whereas in describing himself his instinct is instead to offer his current thoughts about his own status as a public intellectual.

The other value to these observations written under particular stress in the spring of 1795 is that they indicate that Ferguson himself was only too aware that his career as a thinker and author, particularly after the *Essay* had been published, had had a number of distinct facets, each with their own trajectories and, in his own mind, their own attractions and merits.<sup>5</sup> This is why Ferguson's comments to Macpherson are a useful point of departure when thinking about how his intellectual life had evolved since 1767. In particular I want to take up his own hint about the complex relationship between his multiple academic profiles, a dimension to his later life that was arguably to be exaggerated and strongly reinforced by his extreme longevity, and consider each of them in turn: Ferguson as a pioneer of social theory; Ferguson as historian of Rome; Ferguson as a professor of moral philosophy; and Ferguson as the symbolic personification of the Scottish Enlightenment – the latter perhaps the capacity in which many of us probably first encountered him (in his guise as one

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., II: 361.

<sup>4</sup> As we cannot but be aware in hindsight, Ferguson was to live more than another twenty years.

<sup>5</sup> Not the least of Ferguson's concerns was, as he emphasised in this letter, that publishers had radically divergent opinions about the usefulness and therefore the commercial saleability of his competing scholarly interests.

of Richard Sher's 'moderate literati of Edinburgh').<sup>6</sup> The intention here is to take each aspect and to reflect upon it as a way of thinking about Ferguson's achievements, especially as they have been apprehended by other people, in the years, decades and centuries that came after the *Essay*.

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In some ways the interpretative framework in which we have to set Ferguson as a theorist of society is the one that changed most, and has continued to change most, since the *Essay* – in which that theory was mainly laid out – was first published. Certainly, it is a truism to say that Ferguson also contributed to modifying that framework just as its subsequent evolution has forced regular reassessment of his ideas about civil society by succeeding generations. For example, Adam Smith's act of publishing *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) helped create the category we now know as economics. This in turn would become the intellectual framework through whose assumptions and perspectives later ages would largely approach and evaluate that work. Similarly, Ferguson was scarcely a passive bystander as some of the key contexts in which the *Essay* came to be viewed slowly coalesced. In particular, the emergence of sociology from the late Enlightenment onwards, growing to maturity between the age of Montesquieu and that of Auguste Comte and Karl Marx, clearly formed the prism through which he would gradually come to be seen by other leading intellectuals.<sup>7</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, the history of society, with special reference to the relationship between material conditions and social organisation (which the *Essay* had demonstrated could be successfully written), was central not only to the establishment of sociology as an academic discipline and literary genre but also to the formation of new philosophical systems and political ideologies in that period (materialism and Marxism being much the most obvious). This, in turn, ensured that even before the emergence of interest in the Scottish Enlightenment as such from the late 1960s onwards Ferguson was always a name with which to conjure, especially to those specialists interested in the early years

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<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Meek, 'The Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology' in John Saville (ed.), *Democracy and the Labour Movement* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1954), 84–102; John D. Brewer, 'Conjectural History, Sociology and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Scotland: Adam Ferguson and the Division of Labour' in D. McCrone, S. Kendrick and P. Straw (eds), *The Making of Scotland: Nation, Culture and Social Change* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 13–30. Both Smith and Marx knew and were to some extent influenced by Ferguson's first great work.

of social science. Scholars such as Ludwig Gumplowicz and William Lehman readily conceived of him as a kindred spirit along with Comte, Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Mannheim – as a man who had contributed meaningfully to the on-going project of analysing out the internal workings of human society and social structure.<sup>8</sup>

However, this is to get considerably ahead of ourselves. What of the *Essay*, as it were, immediately after the *Essay*? For we do know a reasonable amount about its initial reception in and shortly after the time of its publication. Indeed, there is an especially vivid though perhaps also somewhat artful picture of the earliest reactions from Hume, then in London, who on 24 February 1767 wrote to Ferguson about it thus:

I happen'd yesterday to visit a Person three hours after a Copy of your Performance was open'd for the first time in London. It was by Lord Mansfield. I accept the Omen of its future Success. He was extremely pleas'd with it; said it was perfectly well wrote; assured me, that he would not stop a moment till he had finish'd it, and recommended it strongly to the Perusal of the Archbishop of Yorke, who was present.<sup>9</sup>

Reading between the lines, that both the purported recommender and intended recipient of that recommendation were fellow Scots, indeed both men from Perthshire, invites us to suspect that Hume (whom we also know was himself less enamoured of the *Essay*) was focusing deliberately on those in London who were most likely to express unreserved praise for his friend's work and in whose favour Ferguson himself may have been most keenly interested. A subsequent letter from Hume to Ferguson, dated 10 March, elaborated further on the applause with which the book had reportedly been greeted by well-placed metropolitan opinion:

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<sup>8</sup> Gumplowicz translated and quoted in William C. Lehmann, 'Adam Ferguson' in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968), V: 369; idem., *Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930). Gumplowicz is well-known among Ferguson scholars as having explicitly identified Ferguson as 'the first sociologist' and as having called the *Essay* 'the first natural history of society' in *The Sociological State Idea* [1892]). Lehman is often credited with re-discovering Ferguson as seminal to the emergence of sociology – especially for sociologists in the North American context – with his landmark, philosophically adroit, publication, *Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology* (1930).

<sup>9</sup> David Hume. *Letters of David Hume*, J. Y. T. Grieg (ed.) (2 vols, revised edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), II: 106.

It is with a sincere Pleasure I inform you of the general Success of your Book. I had almost said universal Success; and the Expression would have been proper, as far as a Book can be suppos'd to be diffus'd in a Fortnight, amidst this Hurry of Politics and Faction. I may safely say that I have met with no body, that has read it, who does not praise it; and these are the People, who by their Reputation and Rank commonly give the Tone on these Occasions. Lord Mansfield increas'd his Style of Approbation; and is very loud to that Purpose in his Sundays Societies. I heard Lord Chesterfield and Lord Lyttelton express the same sentiments; and what is above all, Cadell, I am told, is very happy; and is already projecting a second Edition of the same Quarto Size.<sup>10</sup>

We also know that many of the slightly more objective assessments than Hume was trying to offer in the aftermath of publication were not much less favourable.

The positive comments in the *Critical Review*, which were re-printed in *The Scots Magazine* (notably 'none can sit down to the perusal of it without rising a better man and citizen'), and also the friendly account given in the *Monthly Review* (whose critic averred that it would appeal to the proverbial 'reader of taste') are reasonably well-known.<sup>11</sup> Yet it is important not to forget that not all early judgments were quite as congratulatory as the celebrity first-impressions with which Hume was so eager to flatter the author. Here, for example, is what *The Political Register* had to say about the *Essay* on its first appearance:

Ferguson's Essay on the History of Civil Society. 4to. 15s Cadell  
A Work of considerable Merit. The author seems to have borrowed his Plan from Montesquieu's Spirit of Laws; but *sequitur patrem non passibus aquis*. Had he confirmed his general Reasonings by a greater Number of historical Facts, the Performance would have been more valuable.<sup>12</sup>

Nor were all famous readers at the time quite so uncritical as those whom Hume in London was quoting selectively back to the anxious author in Edinburgh. A letter from the poet Thomas Gray to James Beattie on 12 August 1767,

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., II: 125–6.

<sup>11</sup> David Allan, *Adam Ferguson* (Aberdeen: AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Culture, 2007), 123. The proverbial 'reader of taste' in question was the hypothetical impartial spectator to whose supposedly unimpeachable judgment contemporary reviewers repeatedly alluded when favouring a book with praise.

<sup>12</sup> *The Political Register*, 1 (1768), 484.

for example, captures a thought that may well have occurred to quite a few, especially but not exclusively in England:

I have read over (but too hastily) Mr Ferguson's book. There are uncommon strains of eloquence in it: and I was surprised to find not one single idiom of his country (I think) in the whole work. He has not the fault you mention: his application to the heart is frequent, and often successful. His love of Montesquieu and Tacitus has led him into a manner of writing too short-winded and sententious; which those great men, had they lived in better times and under a better government, would have avoided.<sup>13</sup>

Again, the implication is that Ferguson had produced a worthwhile book but one that too obviously leaned on the previous work of superior authors – Montesquieu almost inevitably (and perfectly understandably) to the fore.

Such were the sometimes rather mixed opinions of some of those who read the *Essay* soon after its first appearance, in 1767 and shortly afterwards. Despite or because of this, however, the *Essay* quickly and securely entered what we might think of as the late Enlightenment scholarly canon. In short, it became a significant work, such that it was widely accepted that it needed to be known about by the educated person. This explains why it crops up repeatedly on the shelves of libraries during this period: documented early purchasers included the Manchester Circulating Library (actually a private subscription library in disguise) as soon as it was published, and subsequently other subscription libraries at Warrington, Lewes, Norwich, Sunderland, Kendal (where Wordsworth was later a member), Worcester, Derby and Birmingham. It was also purchased by commercial circulating libraries at Newcastle and at Marylebone in London, and by a number of important individuals as well as famous contemporary bibliophiles like Horace Walpole.<sup>14</sup> We should not

<sup>13</sup> *The Works of Thomas Gray, With Memoirs of His Life and Writings*, by W. Mason (London: J. F. Dove, 1827), 265.

<sup>14</sup> Notable among these consumers were the Essex gentleman John Conyers by the early 1770s, Revd Thomas Crofts, chancellor of the diocese of Peterborough by the early 1780s, and Revd Thomas Clarke, vicar of Hull, the Jennings family at Earnshill in Somerset, and the Rashleigh family at Menabilly in Cornwall. Central Library: 017.242. M22, *A Catalogue of the Present Collection of Books in the Manchester Circulating Library ...* (Manchester, [1766-8]), 1; Warrington: Warrington Library: PS17, *A Catalogue of the Books in the Circulating Library at Warrington, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1784* ([n.p.], [n.d.]), 4; Lewes: East Sussex Record Office, R/L11/1/2, 'Minutes of the Resolutions of the Library Society, No. 2 to 1791', fo.21v; Norwich: Millenium Library: N018.2, *A Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Society of the Norwich Public Library* (Norwich, 1792), 35; Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle City Library: L018.1, *A Catalogue of the Sunderland Subscription Library ...*

be particularly surprised at this physical confirmation of the work's ubiquity. After all, the *Essay* was explicitly recommended by late eighteenth-century advice books on reading which instructed people on the books with which they needed to be familiar. This ensured that within a couple of decades it had become standard reading for anyone thinking about the grand sweep and broader themes of human history as a whole. For example, in the *New Review* in 1786, the reader was advised when studying the history of religions to follow the recommendations of 'Mr Meiners', a teacher at Gottingen in Germany, to look at the *Essay* as part of a plan of reading on that subject.<sup>15</sup>

This is the background within Ferguson's own lifetime, though admittedly the less well-known background, to the largely posthumous and more frequently-studied later reception of Ferguson's work as a historian of civil society and as a sociologist.<sup>16</sup> Now, because the early nineteenth-century part of this story is so much more fully worked out in the existing scholarly literature, there is probably no need to dwell on it in detail here. Nor would it be sensible to dissent from Oz-Salzberger's assessment, as laid out in her biography of Ferguson in the *ODNB*, that reactions to the *Essay*'s contributions to the formation of what was emerging as sociology would be strongly shaped after its author's death

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(Sunderland, 1812), 41; Kendal: Cumbria Archive Service: WD/K/192, 'Minutebook of the Kendal Library, 1794-1824', 19; Worcester: Worcester Public Library: M368/W018.1, *Catalogue of the Worcester Library* (Worcester, 1818), 22; Derby: Derby Public Library: 13726, *Derby Permanent Library: Rules and Regulations ...* (Derby, 1819), 18; Birmingham: Birmingham Public Library: 191620, *Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Birmingham Library ...* (Birmingham, 1798), 83; Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle City Library: L027.3, *Catalogue of J. Marshall's General and Increasing Circulating Library ...* (Newcastle, 1815), 27; Cambridge: Cambridge University Library: Munby.d.28, *A New Catalogue of the Books Contained in the Mary-le-Bone Library ...* ([n.p.], [n.d.]), 27; Chelmsford: Essex Record Office: D/DW/Z8, Copped Hall, Library Catalogue c. 1775, fo. 15r; New Haven, Connecticut: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University: X348 P268 1783/4/7, *A Catalogue of the Curious and Distinguished Library of the Late Reverend and Learned Thomas Crofts ...* (London, 1783), 264; London: British Library: 822.e.19, *Catalogue of a Valuable and Curious Collection of Books ... Particularly Those of the Late Rev. Thomas Clarke ...* (York, 1798), 88; Taunton: Somerset Record Office: DD/CM 146, Catalogue of the Library at Earnshill House, 1787, fo. 17v; Truro: Cornwall Record Office: R(S) 53, 'Catalogue of Books at Menabilly. 1820', 7; *A Catalogue of Horace Walpole's Library*, (eds.) Allen T. Hazen and W.S. Lewis, 3 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 2: 218.

<sup>15</sup> *The New Review; with Literary Curiosities, and Literary Intelligence*, 9 (1786), 6.

<sup>16</sup> This later reception has been opened up both by Fania Oz-Salzberger's work on the German responses and by other scholars on the subsequent impact of the *Essay* on Hegel and Marx in particular. See Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Norbert Waszek, *The Scottish Enlightenment and Hegel's Account of 'Civil Society'* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988); Meek, 'Scottish Contribution'.

by specific contemporary attitudes towards his notion of civil society in particular.<sup>17</sup> Put simply, while his early German admirers like Gotthold Lessing and Friedrich Schiller (not helped by their reliance on semantically questionable German translations of the *Essay*) found this concept peculiarly apposite in the distinctive German social and political context at that time, it would only be the re-emergence of wider interest in civil society as a tool for thinking about the relationship between the state, the individual, and voluntary associationalism – mainly in the later twentieth century at the hands of political theorists like Ernest Gellner and Paul Hirst – that would add further impetus to the existing intellectual interest in Ferguson as an early sociologist which, as we have already noted, had never really faded.<sup>18</sup>

The peculiar evolution of Ferguson's reception as a social scientist may well also help explain the distinctly odd publication history of the *Essay* itself. There were numerous editions in Ferguson's own later lifetime, reflecting undiminished interest in reading and thinking about his arguments at least in the short term, but then no more editions in English (although a couple in German) between the decade of his death and as late as 1966. The continuing acknowledgement of Ferguson's status as a pioneering student of society does not therefore look as though it was sufficient to sustain interest in his great work, since it was out of print for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in Britain. Simply because the *Essay* was the work of a man who had been elevated to the status of a 'founding father of social science' was clearly not enough, in and of itself, to justify publishers' interest.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this was because while his investigation of society's evolution was recognised as a significant precursor to modern sociology in terms of its willingness to treat such subject matter, its specific content and analysis – cast in the outmoded and intensely polemical language of civic virtue and classical republicanism – seemed less relevant to contemporary concerns by the later nineteenth century. We might remember, for instance, Sir Lesley Stephen's unkind dismissal of Ferguson in the *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*. In the *History*, published in 1876, Stephens characterized Ferguson as a 'facile and dexterous declaimer', an insult presumably intended to make him sound more like the occupant of

<sup>17</sup> Fania Oz-Salzberger, 'Adam Ferguson (1723–1816)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/9315>].

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Gellner, 'Adam Ferguson and the Surprising Robustness of Civil Society' in Ernest Gellner and César Cansino (eds), *Liberalism in Modern Times* (Budapest and London: Central European University Press, 1996), 119–31; Paul Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> D.G. MacRae, 'Adam Ferguson, 1723–1816' in Timothy Raison (ed.), *The Founding Fathers of Social Science* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 17–26.

an eighteenth-century Presbyterian pulpit than the denizen of a progressive late-Victorian university department.<sup>20</sup> Only with the re-awakening of keen interest in the notion of civil society *per se*, did the substantive arguments of the *Essay* – couched in the vocabulary of active citizenship, sociability and free association – once again strike sufficient contemporary chords to merit detailed re-reading and consequently formal re-publication.<sup>21</sup> This re-awakening was rooted in the political experiences of Europeans in the post-war period and in the increasing desire of theorists like Gellner and Adam Michnik and Friedrich Hayek to explain why some societies turn out to be much better able to protect and preserve individual freedom. Duncan Forbes's 1966 Edinburgh University Press edition of the *Essay* marks the beginning of the fuller and more rounded modern appreciation of Ferguson as a student of human society, not merely as an early practitioner of a type of intellectual enterprise that was in the process of becoming sociology but as a significant participant with interesting things still to say to us in the never-ending historical conversation about the optimal organisation of political society.<sup>22</sup>

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The history of Ferguson as a Roman historian, although less rich and also considerably more straightforward than his fluctuating career as a social scientist, actually begins before the crucial publication had even appeared. The following comes from *The York Chronicle* of 1773, a reliable conveyor of metropolitan literary gossip to bookish readers in the north of England:

The eloquent author of the essay on civil society, Dr Adam Ferguson, is employed, we are informed, in painting the revolutions of the Roman story. This great subject has not hitherto met with an historian equal to it. Catrous and Rouille are circumstantial and minute, but without discernment and penetration. Rollin is perpetually starting aside to make moral reflections. He is an excellent Christian, and a good man; but, the most insipid of all historians. Echard had parts, but they were not

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<sup>20</sup> Sir Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; 2 vols, New York: P. Smith, 1949), II: 182.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Bernhard, 'Civil Society and Democratic Transition in East Central Europe', *Political Science Quarterly*, 108 (1993), 307–26; John Keane (ed.), *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Duncan Forbes (ed.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966).

those which figure in narration. Goldsmith has given a Roman history, but never consulted the authors of antiquity. He writes, accordingly; without information, and with an utter contempt of all the rules of grammar. Hooke, or those who wrote for him, had industry and labour, but while they judge of every thing by the morality of the gospel, history is falsified, and the most perfect characters are degraded. We should hope that Dr Ferguson will exceed all these writers. Indeed, it will be little glory to surpass them.<sup>23</sup>

When it did finally appear a decade later, these earnest expectations were often to be fulfilled, at least if the critics' reactions are again any guide.

For example, though, the *Monthly Review* noted that it was 'a new work constructed with old materials,' it nonetheless purred that Ferguson's Roman history had thoroughly bested its recent rivals:

We recollect no history of the very instructive and interesting period, which is his principal object, that enters so deeply into the conduct and character of the several parties and their leaders, or places them in a clearer and more striking light. Other historians of this memorable period give us a confined view of the subject, in comparison of Dr Ferguson, who leads us to a more elevated situation, and a more extensive prospect. In a word, the philosopher and the statesman will read the history now before us with equal pleasure and advantage.<sup>24</sup>

Yet as with the *Essay*, the critics who had to assess Ferguson's credentials as a Roman historian in the immediate aftermath of publication were not unanimously positive. The *New Review's* judge, for instance, averred that '*The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, by Adam Ferguson, LL.D.' was rather a mixed bag:

The account of the intrigues and convulsions which took place after the death of Cæsar amused me, but I was not equally pleased with what followed, and thought it wanted spirit. This, indeed, is too much the defect of the whole composition . . . With respect to philosophical reflexions, or moral instruction, I have found less than I expected, though I own I did not expect much; for in my mind there was little or nothing to add to

<sup>23</sup> *The York Chronicle*, 23 (1773), 184.

<sup>24</sup> *The Monthly Review*, lxxviii (1783), 342–3.

what Montesquieu in his *Traité de la Grandeur et de la Decadence des Romains*, and Machiavelli (but for whom I am persuaded Montesquieu would not have written that work), had said before. Dr Ferguson is a great deal too sceptical upon several important questions, he seldom or ever takes a part, and when he does, supports it with a coolness which is suited to reflexions on history, and may be philosophical, but coincides little with the taste of one who is not ashamed to say he has been used to read the Roman history in continual admiration. The style is in general easy, flowing, and unaffected: there is, however, too much sameness, it being mostly adapted to placid narration; nor is it always clear, always dignified, or always grammatical.<sup>25</sup>

Again the knowledgeable contemporary only too easily juxtaposed Ferguson's writings with those of his obvious immediate predecessor, the great Montesquieu – and not necessarily to the Scottish author's advantage.

Nonetheless, Ferguson's Roman history, which many viewed as filling an important gap in the English-language market for books on early Rome, quickly entered the canon as effectively compulsory modern reading for the subject.<sup>26</sup> Again, as the standard text it almost immediately became, it found its way rapidly into libraries and book collections: the subscription libraries at Carlisle and Penzance bought it, as did those at Whitby and Worcester. Numerous individuals, like Charles Dormer the Warwickshire gentleman, Nathaniel Edwards the Derby solicitor and Joseph Marks from Teignmouth in Devon can also be shown to have placed copies on their own bookshelves.<sup>27</sup> Like the *Essay*, we can also see it immediately being picked up in the guidance offered to contemporary readers, as in *The Bee, or Literary Weekly Intelligencer* in 1792, which prescribed it as one of five recommended works for 'a course of reading'

<sup>25</sup> *The New Review*, 3 (1783), 335–6.

<sup>26</sup> In this connection, recall the enthusiastic anticipation of the precocious commentator in *The New York Chronicle* (23 [1773], 1840) referred to above.

<sup>27</sup> Carlisle: Carlisle Public Library: M1284, *Carlisle Library. Rules for the Regulation of the Carlisle Library* ... (Carlisle, 1819), 13; Penzance: Morrab Library: MOR/LIB/8a, *Rules and Catalogue of the Penzance Library* ... (Penzance, 1824), 23; Whitby: Whitby Museum: 027.240748, *Laws and Regulations of the Whitby Subscription Library* ... (Whitby, 1823), 21; *Catalogue of the Worcester Library*, 22; Warwick: Warwickshire County Record Office: CR895/49, 'Inventory of the Furniture and effects at Grove Park Bequeathed as Heir Looms by The Rt. Hon. Charles Lord Dormer. 1819', fo. 19v; Derby: Derby Public Library: Vol. 5348, *Catalogue of the ... Library of Mr Edwards, Solicitor* ... (Derby, 1826), 13; London: British Library: S.C. 813(7), *Catalogue of Books ... Including the Library of Joseph Marks, Esq.* ... (London, 1807), 23.

in ancient and mediaeval European history.<sup>28</sup> This generally very warm early reception and secure canonisation for almost automatic use by well-informed readers also tallies with Ferguson's own estimation of his scholarly performances late in his life. Looking back in the same letter to Sir John Macpherson in 1795, Ferguson asserted that the Roman history was his most popular work, a judgment reinforced by the publishers' continuing interest in it.

This is, after all, why Ferguson revisited Italy in the 1790s to survey first-hand the scene of some of the events he had first written about a couple of decades earlier, for a new edition of this work. We get a sense of this excitement and his continuing emotional engagement with Roman history in a somewhat earlier letter to Macpherson, written from Venice on 19 October 1793. In this letter Ferguson describes his own arrival in northern Italy and the detailed further studies he had been undertaking literally on the ground where those historical events had actually occurred:

In the way I took by Nurenburch & Munich I avoided that distress, came prosperously through the Tyroll and at Verona began to reap the Fruits of my Labours. If you remember the Cimbri and Teutones are said to have performed wonders against Catulus the Roman general in that neighbourhood And tho it be not of much consequence whether that tale be exaggerated or not yet I was anxious to judge of its Credibility on the Spot & got on Horse back from Verona for that Purpose & reconnoitred the banks of the Adige for Some little way.<sup>29</sup>

It is from this elevated position that the subsequent fall of Ferguson's Roman history thus has to be measured. There were numerous English-language editions in both Britain and North America in the last years of Ferguson's life and through the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century (a noteworthy abridged edition was published in New York as late as 1873). Indeed, the work clearly retained significant currency in the English-speaking world for substantially longer than the *Essay*. However, it was gradually and completely eclipsed by new treatments of the same subject – like Barthold Niebuhr's, increasingly influential through the mid-nineteenth century, and Theodore Mommsen's which dominated by the turn of the twentieth. Both of these authors

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<sup>28</sup> These readings (in which, incidentally, three of the five authors were Scots) were 'Gillies's history of Greece — Rollin's ancient history, volumes 8th, 9th, and 10<sup>th</sup> — Ferguson's history of the Roman republic — Gibbon's history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, abridged — Robertson's history of Charles V ...' *The Bee, or Literary Weekly Intelligencer*, 8 (1792), 131.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 359.

were pioneers of the sceptical interrogation of original sources who together effectively rendered Ferguson's magisterial eighteenth-century generalisations redundant. Consequently, no more editions appeared and nor was there even to be a belated revival of serious interest from publishers like that which has overtaken the *Essay* in the last fifty years.<sup>30</sup> Ferguson the Roman historian, in other words, became effectively occluded by Ferguson the social scientist. Even with the renewed attention given to his intellectual achievements from the late 1960s-onwards to the very recent work of Iain McDaniel, Ferguson has barely begun to be rescued from this position.<sup>31</sup>

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What of Ferguson the moral philosopher after the *Essay*? What happened to this aspect of his work and how did it shape Ferguson's later life and posthumous reception? Curiously, it seems to have followed a trajectory not at all like those described by his studies of the Roman republic or of civil society. The publication histories of the *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* and the *Principles of Moral and Political Science* again give a clear indication of how Ferguson's intellectual profile in this area faded very quickly and much earlier than in his other fields of interest. The *Institutes*, for example, appeared not just in English but in other languages throughout the late eighteenth century, but was already falling out of favour even while its author was still alive. A Basel edition (in English) of 1800, a St Petersburg edition (in Russian) of 1804 and a Madras edition (again in English but for local use) of 1828 marked the end of the road for this work's currency, with the rest of the nineteenth century and the first three-quarters of the twentieth entirely barren. The *Principles of Moral and Political Science* convey broadly the same lesson, although the first edition did not materialise until 1792. After the French edition at Paris in 1821 it disappears from the list of new publications for the best part of two centuries. Again, like the *Institutes*, it was a case of an author almost outlasting his book, and certainly of Ferguson surviving long enough to appreciate that his star as a moral philosopher, and as a serious contributor to ethical reasoning, was rapidly waning.

Another letter to Sir John Macpherson, this time dated 2 September 1799, confirms that Ferguson was more than aware of this emerging problem and that he was bitterly disappointed by it. Having in his previous letter two months

<sup>30</sup> Barthold Niebuhr, *Römische Geschichte* (3 vols, Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1811–32); Theodore Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte* (3 vols, Leipzig: Reimer & Hersel, 1854–6).

<sup>31</sup> Iain McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

earlier asked whether what he called ‘my new Edition of the Roman Story’ had yet reached Macpherson in London, he this time claimed to feel ‘a listless indifference about every thing that is passing in [the] world even about my own books Authors & Readers’.<sup>32</sup> If this seems inherently implausible for a man known for his pride and for his keen interest in his own literary profile, then a clue follows about what was making him sound so dispirited. In discussing the Scottish philosopher Sir James Mackintosh’s recent publications in London, Ferguson told Macpherson that

He had his reasons probably for not mentioning me & I am not Solicitous about them. He will probably procure the moral Philosophy that Popularity in England which I wished for but have been unable to Obtain. His taking his ground in the Law is not so apt to alarm the Universities & the Church as if he had called his Object Moral Philosophy which those Authorities sometimes mention among the Corruptions of the Times.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, looking back at the disappointing reception of his own philosophical writings from the vantage point of 1799, Ferguson is of two minds. On the one hand, he affects not to care very much about it, but on the other, he is clearly unable to resist proffering an excuse – that is, the putative hostility of English academia and institutionalised Christianity – for the failure of these works to achieve the lasting impact he had sought, at least in the south. After these comments, Ferguson’s letter then goes on to invite Macpherson’s candid thoughts on the new edition of ‘the Roman History’ and expresses pessimism that the London booksellers would support a similar revised edition of what he calls ‘my Other more recent Book’ (referring to the *Principles*). These self-reflections serve to underline not only his sense that his career was moving towards a natural close but also that his place as a Roman historian and his place as a moral philosopher were uncomfortably distinct.<sup>34</sup> There seems little doubt from these remarks that later in life Ferguson had become frustrated. This was entirely understandable because the philosophical ideas that most excited him and which he wanted to see achieve lasting influence, above all through publication, were not receiving the attention and the recognition that he still craved.

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<sup>32</sup> Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 456–7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 457.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 457.

Sadly, the kind of evidence that we used earlier to document the currency of the *Essay* and the Roman history into the first half of the nineteenth century only confirms the accuracy of Ferguson's gloomy analysis. Looking at the book collections and libraries of the end of the eighteenth century and thereafter, in which his other works were so often present, the relative obscurity of his philosophical writings is clear enough to see. Revd Thomas Clarke in Yorkshire owned the *Principles*, as did the subscription library at Worcester, while the subscription library at Norwich and the Marylebone Circulating Library near London both held the *Institutes*. However, most of the lending organisations and book-buyers who owned the *Essay* and/or the Roman history did not deign to acquire copies of either of Ferguson's philosophical works.<sup>35</sup> This was not simply because of a disciplinary bias against moral philosophy as such, let alone against works of this kind from specifically Scottish authors (as Ferguson was so keen to suggest to Macpherson). Indeed, the Birmingham Subscription Library and the Sheffield Book Society, for example, both embraced the philosophical writings of his fellow-countrymen Adam Smith, James Beattie, Thomas Reid, and Dugald Stewart but did not own either the *Institutes* or the *Principles*. Furthermore, many of the individual buyers of the *Essay* and/or the Roman history did possess a range of philosophical works that noticeably excluded Ferguson's own writings in that same field. For example, John Conyers in Essex had both Hume's *Second Enquiry* (1751) and the *Four Dissertations* (1757) as well as Ferguson's *Essay* but did not pick up the *Institutes* (and was deceased before the *Principles* emerged). Likewise, Joseph Marks in Devon, when his books were catalogued in 1807, owned Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764) as well as Ferguson's *Rome* but not the latter's philosophical writings.<sup>36</sup> Drilling down into the actual book purchases and literary preferences of specific readers late in Ferguson's own life therefore underlines what he had himself begun to notice – his comparative marginalisation as a moral philosopher. This is especially evident when set against his profiles as a classical scholar and a student of human society, in both of which capacities he still had a viable future as a prominent contributor. And it perhaps allows one better to appreciate the notable tone of wistfulness in his

<sup>35</sup> *Catalogue of a Valuable and Curious Collection of Books ... Particularly Those of the Late Rev. Thomas Clarke ...*, 44; *Catalogue of the Worcester Library*, 22; *A Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Society of the Norwich Public Library*, 23; *A New Catalogue of the Books Contained in the Mary-le-Bone Library ...*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Birmingham Library ...*, 14, 17, 19, 39; Sheffield: Sheffield Archives: MD2221/1, Sheffield Book Club, fos 25r, 26v; Copped Hall, Library Catalogue c. 1775, fos 18v, 18r, 15r; *Catalogue of Books ... Including the Library of Joseph Marks, Esq. ...*, 21, 23.

letter to Macpherson from 23 March 1795 where he says ‘I would rather work on Philosophy than Roman History’: the former was where his heart lay but he had been forced to resign himself to the fact that public taste and bookseller demands emphatically dictated otherwise.<sup>37</sup>

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This brings us lastly to Ferguson as the embodiment of the Scottish Enlightenment, a symbol of a golden era in Scottish culture – a status he enjoys for many of those interested in his work today but also a role he was starting to take on even during his own last years. We can see this clearly in nostalgic treatments like the one found in Henry Cockburn’s *Memorials of His Time* (1856), where Ferguson stands as the last vestige of a lost age. Cockburn’s reminiscence is worth quoting at length because it captures the familiar Ferguson who has come down to modern scholars interested in the social and cultural world of the Scottish Enlightenment:

Our neighbor on the east, was old Adam Ferguson, the historian of Rome, and Stewart’s predecessor in our moral chair – a singular apparition. In his younger years he was a handsome and resolute man. Being chaplain to the Black Watch, he could not be induced even by the positive orders of his commanding officer to remain in his proper place in the rear during an action, but persisted in being engaged in front. Time and illness however had been dealing with him, and when I first knew him, he was a spectacle well worth beholding. His hair was silky and white; his eyes animated and light blue; his cheeks sprinkled with broken red, like autumnal apples, but fresh and healthy; his lips thin, and the under one curled. A severe paralytic attack had reduced his animal vitality, though it left no external appearance, and he required considerable artificial heat. His raiment, therefore consisted of half-boots lined with fur, cloth breeches, a long cloth waistcoat with capacious pockets, a single-breasted coat, a cloth greatcoat also lined with fur, and a felt hat commonly tied by a ribbon below the chin. His boots were black; but with this exception the whole coverings, including the hat, were of a quaker gray color, or of a whitish brown; and he generally wore the furred greatcoat even within doors. When he walked forth, he used a tall staff, which he commonly held at arm’s length out towards the right side; and his two coats, each

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<sup>37</sup> Ferguson, *Correspondence*, II: 361.

buttoned by only the upper button, flowed open below, and exposed the whole of his curious and venerable figure. His gait and air were noble; his gesture slow; his look full of dignity and composed fire. He looked like a philosopher from Lapland. His palsy ought to have killed him in his fiftieth year; but rigid care enabled him to live uncrippled, either in body or mind, nearly fifty years more. Wine and animal food besought his appetite in vain; but huge messes of milk and vegetables disappeared before him, always in the never-failing cloth and fur. I never heard of his dining out, except at his relation Dr Joseph Black's, where his son Sir Adam (the friend of Scott) used to say it was delightful to see the two philosophers rioting over a boiled turnip.<sup>38</sup>

Now, there are good grounds for treating Cockburn's vision of Ferguson with scepticism. Unfortunately, it perpetuates the old myth about Ferguson's participation in the battle of Fontenoy, an invention satisfactorily despatched in recent times by Jane Fagg.<sup>39</sup> It also betrays a weak grasp of basic biographical detail. In the succeeding passage, Cockburn claims that when departing for Italy in the summer of 1793 (an event Cockburn claimed to remember watching) Ferguson was seventy-two years of age when in fact, having been born in 1723, he was just turning seventy. More generally, Cockburn has clear motive for perpetrating historiographical crimes against the truth. A man so intimately involved as an adult – along with his Whiggish political allies – in the selective re-modelling of Scotland, had too much invested in a very particular vision of the old Scotland (now passing out of living memory by the 1840s) to worry too much about strict accuracy when reflecting on his own childhood. So, *caveat emptor*.

Yet it is this symbolic or iconic Ferguson, along with Ferguson the pioneering sociologist and student of civil society, which still holds the field in our own time. The prevailing image of Ferguson – as a leading figure among the Moderate literati of Edinburgh – is of a civically engaged participant implicated in the cultural, intellectual and political life of eighteenth-century Scotland. He was directly and intimately involved in the Douglas controversy, the Ossian affair, and the militia campaign. He was an active member of associations like the Select Society and the Poker Club, and taught in Scotland's leading university – first in science and then in moral philosophy. Close to the political masters

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<sup>38</sup> Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of His Time* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1856), 48–50.

<sup>39</sup> Ferguson, *Correspondence*, I: xxiv.

of the country and entwined in the patronage system, Ferguson was involved in the American Revolutionary crisis and rubbed shoulders with Hume, Smith, Robertson, Kames, Blair and the rest. Indeed, there is almost no significant theme running through what we now recognise as the Scottish Enlightenment that cannot be illustrated to a useful degree by reference to Adam Ferguson and his personal contribution. He epitomises the world of the Scottish Enlightenment better than any of its other leading figures by virtue of his range of interests, the extent of his connections and, not least, his restlessness, his energy, and (it would turn out) his considerable longevity.

Finally, returning to Ferguson's March 1795 letter to Sir John Macpherson with which we began, we can see that this role for Ferguson, as a survivor and a symbol, was again something on which in his last years he actually had sufficient perspective to be able to comment directly: 'People who live long like me,' he says, 'must be Content to be the last.'<sup>40</sup> By this time Hume had been dead for virtually twenty years, Kames for more than ten, Smith and Robertson were also gone; and yet at this point Ferguson himself would live for more than another two decades. As he writes later in the same paragraph, keenly aware of his developing singularity and evidently a little surprised by it, he also says something else very curious: 'Many old people have died but I am yet as well as you saw me.' Once again switching between reflecting on his own health and mortality and thinking more specifically about his scholarly interests and intellectual status as an old man, he confides to his friend: 'the truth is I do little of any thing & expect no Attention if I were to do more.' How are we to take this? Again, one suspects, with a pinch of salt. For the notion that Ferguson was intellectually inactive in the 1790s is demonstrably fanciful: it conflicts with what we know about his relationships with other literary figures and in particular with his work on revising the Roman history (which eventually came out in the long-awaited new edition only at the end of the decade). We also need to be circumspect about Ferguson's suggestion that if he were to expend more labour in scholarly pursuits he would not expect to garner much attention. In one sense this may be true in reflecting his unease at the differential performance of his separate intellectual enterprises – the great and continuing popularity of the Roman history in particular but not of the philosophical works. It is not, however, a wholly accurate estimation of his intellectual significance or of the enduring interest in his life and work. Everything we know about his personality combined with the number of times he felt it necessary to disguise a yearning for attention when writing to Macpherson makes it clear that he wanted and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., II: 361.

expected attention. That growing numbers are now interested in exploring Adam Ferguson's achievements after the *Essay* more than two centuries later – something that would certainly have absolutely delighted him – is also proof enough of the enduring relevance of his separate intellectual enterprises.

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Bringing together new and established scholars, the essays in this collection offer a significant reassessment of the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, Adam Ferguson. Moving beyond a concentration on his early *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), the book explores his experience as a teacher of moral philosophy, his political views in an Age of Revolution, and his historical treatment of the Roman Republic. It also offers an assessment of his intellectual influence and legacy.

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