

Barbarism and Empire  
in Scottish Enlightenment History

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The Enlightenment has been criticised for employing categories of “barbarism” and “civilization” to champion modern European society over other cultures. For example, John Gray points to the idea of barbarism as an encapsulation of “the Enlightenment repudiation of the irreducible plurality of cultures in favour of the assertion that all civilisations are, or will be, exemplars of a single model.”<sup>1</sup> Implicit in this critique is a view of the Enlightenment as espousing a blinkered universalism which justified European imperialism over supposedly less advanced peoples; empire was conceived of as a means of civilising savage and barbaric peoples for their betterment and for Europe’s gain. This depiction of the imperialistic “Enlightenment project” has come under attack by Sankar Muthu in his 2003 book *Enlightenment Against Empire*. Muthu argues for a pluralizing of “Enlightenments” and identifies a strain of anti-imperialist thought in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment. For Muthu, the political thought of Diderot, Kant, and Herder follows Rousseau’s wake in attempting to reconcile universalist ideals with cultural difference and plurality. These three philosophers upheld several notions simultaneously: that all human beings are deserving of moral and political respect; that humans are fundamentally cultural beings, i.e., they form and are shaped by culture; and that there will be a moral incommensurability and relativity when attempting to compare different cultures. With these shared premises, these thinkers questioned the moral bases and supposed benefits of “civilisation” and hence of European imperialism in their time. Anti-imperialist Enlightenment thought represents an openness to cultural pluralism which would then be closed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as writers emphasised race and nation as categories by which different peoples could be ranked.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose in this paper is not to dispute Muthu’s treatment of the three anti-imperialist thinkers he identifies, though his characterisations of Diderot, Kant, and Herder are questionable.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I should like to focus my attention on other 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment thinkers, particularly David Hume, who treat of savagery, barbarism, civilisation, and (to varying degrees) empire in their narrative or conjectural historical writing. In particular, I shall examine whether or not similar ideas to Muthu’s premises of anti-imperialist thought which also underpin Scottish Enlightenment histories can be said to justify European imperialism especially over non-European peoples.

Historical writing in the Scottish Enlightenment is a fruitful area in which to explore the relation between Enlightenment and imperialism.<sup>4</sup> As with much of 18<sup>th</sup> century European political thought, the works of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers stress the cultural agency of human beings alongside the idea of a universal human nature, as

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<sup>1</sup> John Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 264-9; and see Jennifer Pitts, *The Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see John Duncan’s review of Muthu’s book in the *Dalhousie Review* 85 (Spring 2005): 137-8.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term “Scottish Enlightenment” to describe the group of Scottish intellectuals clustered in Edinburgh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. All of the writers I focus on frequently met and corresponded with each other, and their works reflect a cluster of shared assumptions albeit with significant differences of opinion as well.

well as the particularities of different cultures.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, theorists such as Montesquieu and Rousseau emphasised the perils of judging different peoples by a single set of moral and political standards. Scottish Enlightenment history may be situated in the context of a turn away from the contractualism and perceived ahistorical tendencies of 17<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke. Hobbes was quite definite that the “natural condition of mankind” is principally a hypothetical construct for examining the consequences of the absence of government and laws, as in a civil war.<sup>6</sup> The social covenant is likewise not a historical moment—given that the likely origins of all government lie in conquest,<sup>7</sup> not a contract between individuals (an insight that would be repeated by Hume)—but more instructive as a guide to the rights of sovereign power and of individuals. Hobbes’s contractual politics rely on theoretical reconstruction rather than historical narrative. There is greater confusion in Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* concerning the historical status of the state of nature, the state of war, and the social contract, but for 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, his contribution to political thought rests in conceptions of rights, property, and freedom which underlay in part the 1688 revolution in England. Indeed, it was precisely this lack of clarity in Locke’s reasoning which would be succeeded by Whig historical writing—much derided by Hume.<sup>8</sup>

The discourse of barbarism and civilisation fully informs Scottish Enlightenment history. While, for example, Montesquieu examined cultural particularities in relation to laws and government, the historical writing of the Scottish Enlightenment develops in particular a historical conception of politics (prior, of course, to philosophy of history as theorised by Herder, Hegel, Marx, and others) in the sense of political life as understood *through* historical narrative, especially the history of medieval to modern Europe. Thus Hume’s *History of England* is a history informed by philosophy (“philosophical history,” as some scholars refer to it),<sup>9</sup> but not in the sense of historically demonstrating contract theory or a political philosophy of absolute sovereignty, as in the case of Hobbes’s history of the English civil war, *Behemoth; or the Long Parliament*. Scottish Enlightenment historians did not simply write history interspersed with frequent commentary, but conceptualised historical change in terms of specific historical stages of society: savagery, barbarism, and civilisation.<sup>10</sup>

It is pre-eminently Hume’s thought which laid down much of the groundwork for subsequent Scottish Enlightenment history. As early as *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume criticised contractual theories of politics as unhistorical. While he tended

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<sup>5</sup> Like Muthu, the term “culture” is employed here in the sense of “cultivation,” i.e., aspects of human collective life which transcend a merely biological conception of human existence. Cultivation in its agricultural as well as cultural sense is central to Scottish Enlightenment thought on history.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chap. 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, conclusion, p. 486: “there is scarce a Common-wealth in the world, whose beginnings can in conscience be justified.”

<sup>8</sup> David Hume, *The History of England*, ed. William B. Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), vol. 6, p. 533.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. David Fate Norton and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *David Hume: Philosophical Historian* (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Enlightenment thought deeply influenced the outstanding historical work of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; but for reasons of brevity, Gibbon’s mammoth work will not be considered. See J.G.A. Pocock’s *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2 vols., for a detailed examination of the intellectual and historical contexts of Gibbon’s history.

to regard Lockean principles of freedom and property as “just and reasonable” in themselves,<sup>11</sup> Hume regarded the doctrine that all government arose from a state of nature and was founded on an original contract to be contrary to the evidence of human experience. Locke and his Whig successors failed to consider that inhabitants of the first societies would be too “barbarous and uninstructed” to arrive at such notions as the natural freedom and equality of human beings, the foundation of government on popular consent, and the centrality of promises as the basis of political allegiance.<sup>12</sup> Thus even in his early work, Hume adduced the barbarism of early human societies to expose the unhistorical character of Lockean and post-Lockean thought. In addition, this historical critique underpin a conservative defence of established authority against Lockean license, another key aspect of the Scottish Enlightenment’s historical politics.

Hume’s *History of England* and subsequent histories by Scottish Enlightenment writers including those examined in this paper—William Robertson and Adam Ferguson—exemplified Hume’s declaration that “this is the historical age and this [Scotland] the historical nation. . . .”<sup>13</sup> Scottish Enlightenment histories followed in the wake of Hume’s philosophical history and historical politics. But what is the peculiar value of Scottish Enlightenment history for the question of the Enlightenment’s relation to imperialism? First, the Scots were in a unique position to comment on British imperial power. After the 1707 Act of Union, Scotland was fully integrated into the political entity of Great Britain. Historically, Scotland had been colonised and (according to many) oppressed, but by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it could be seen as the northern periphery of the heart of a growing global empire. Scottish Enlightenment thinkers tended to regard themselves as North Britons rather than as a wholly distinct society relative to the English.<sup>14</sup> As inhabitants of Scotland, they considered the differences between Scottish culture (which they saw as largely barbaric until recently) and modern English cultural and political life, which was often taken as the archetype of “civil society.” Lowland Scotland, especially the economic and administrative centres of Glasgow and Edinburgh, benefited from English commerce and imperialism; though as we shall see, these historians’ admiration of England had its limits.

Second, the writers under consideration here reflected through their narrative and conjectural histories on the subject of empire. Of the three historians, Hume was the most philosophical but reflected least on European imperialism, as it largely fell outside his focus on English political history. Nevertheless, the major theme of his six-volume *History of England* (1752-64) is the transition from barbarism to civilisation; thus Hume’s history is indispensable for an understanding of these concepts and their implications for imperial expansion. Robertson, in contrast, was the most conventional of the three in his thinking, but his views on social progress, early Scottish history, and especially on Spanish imperialism in the Americas (as well as the fate of European empire in India) from 1759 until his death show a clear application of the concepts of savagery, barbarism, and civilisation to early modern imperialism. Ferguson’s *An Essay*

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<sup>11</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (London: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 600-1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 591-2.

<sup>13</sup> David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), vol. 1, p. 230.

<sup>14</sup> See Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

*on the History of Civil Society* (1767), however, is more conjectural than it is narrative. Nevertheless, it is both influenced by and somewhat subversive of these historical categories as developed by Hume (and Adam Smith); so one can look to Ferguson's work to locate some anti-imperialist ideas within Scottish Enlightenment thought. As I shall argue, the three historians taken together are certainly uncomfortable with a triumphalist, imperialist discourse of civilising savages and barbarians, and yet share a certain commitment to modern commercial civilisation—and hence to the benign commercial empires of their day.

### **Hume on English Civilisation and Barbarism**

As argued above, Hume's conception of human beings in states of savagery and barbarism countered the historically suspect nature particularly of Lockean contractualism. Hume conceded that the first governments could be said to be founded on an original contract in the sense that people voluntarily "abandoned their native liberty" in exchange for a peaceful and orderly existence. But such informal or tacit consent to government could not be an effective and binding basis of government, which in its early stages could only be sustained by force and persuasion. Chieftains acquired authority through war and conquest; "[n]o compact or agreement, it is evident, was expressly formed for general submission; an idea far beyond the comprehension of savages."<sup>15</sup> Government by popular consent is possible only in civilised societies.

Hume maintained that the difference between savage and civilised states rests on a fundamental economic basis. The savage state is characterised by the occupations of hunting and fishing, which are only left behind when people work on the land (Hume expressly used the term "culture") and transform the products of husbandry "into all the commodities which are necessary or ornamental to human life." The latter activity eventually leads to the arts of luxury which, Hume declared, "add to the happiness of the state." Against neo-classical republican arguments against luxury for weakening the vitality of the state and corrupting mores, Hume insisted that manufacture and trade, as they arise from industry and arts, in fact increase sovereign power and social well-being. Ancient polities may have enjoyed greater power over their subjects than do modern regimes because of "their want of commerce and luxury," but in a peaceful age lacking in martial spirit, commerce and luxury promote stability and prosperity. In place of constant warfare, moderns engage in foreign commerce, which in turn fosters domestic luxury and industry.<sup>16</sup> Civilisation in its modern guise is equated above all with commercial society.

Hume's *History of England* is, as Duncan Forbes observes, "the history of civilisation in England."<sup>17</sup> That is to say, it is a narrative structured by the transition from barbarism to civilisation in England—not, however, from the savage state, as it opens not with the prehistoric origins of English society (given that the first beginnings of government precede written records),<sup>18</sup> but rather from the invasion of Julius Caesar. Hence, Hume's *History* begins at the point at which barbaric peoples in a rudimentary state of agriculture encounter Roman civilisation. But they revert to barbarism after the

<sup>15</sup> David Hume, "Of the Original Contract," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), p. 468.

<sup>16</sup> Hume, "Of Commerce," in *Essays*, pp. 256-63.

<sup>17</sup> Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 298.

<sup>18</sup> See "Of the Original Contract," p. 468.

Romans leave, from which time the long journey to civilisation is treated. England's gradual rise from barbarism to civilised society is, as he put it in his essay "Of the Origin of Government," the "perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between AUTHORITY and LIBERTY; and neither of them...absolutely prevail in the contest."<sup>19</sup> Throughout Hume's historical narrative, the reader witnesses the ebb and flow of liberty and authority until a final balance is reached in the aftermath of the 1688 revolution. Both liberty and authority take on barbarous forms in early parts of English history, but the eventual balance between the two involves a civilised form of each.

Hume's narrative is a far from chauvinistic account of English history. In contrast to earlier writers such as Bolingbroke, who maintained that British liberty is simply an inheritance from remote ancestors to be protected against oppressors from time to time,<sup>20</sup> Hume regarded ancient and medieval England as thoroughly uncivilised and therefore not truly free in the modern sense. Unlike even the Gauls, who at least had regular commerce with Italy, the Britons whom the Romans encountered especially in the northern and western parts of the isles lived in primitive pastoral simplicity, "ignorant of all the refinements of life."<sup>21</sup> The Saxons who later ruled the island were equally barbarous. They may have possessed the Germanic virtues admired by republicans and Whig historians alike of "valour and the love of liberty," but these qualities, Hume reminds us, are "the only virtues which can have place among an uncivilised people, where justice and humanity are commonly neglected." Such barbarous nations were ruled by warrior-chieftains who were bound by the consent of other warriors,<sup>22</sup> in contrast to modern forms of representation. Against writers who suppose that Christianity was a civilising influence on the Saxons, Hume not only discounted the effects of the Christian religion on their manners, but adduced their receptiveness to the "great mixture of credulity and superstition" in Roman Catholicism as evidence of their barbarous ignorance.<sup>23</sup> In addition to its absurd doctrines, the separation of civil and ecclesiastical power in medieval Europe was a form of barbarism, in contrast to the union of these power which maintains peace and order "in every civilised government."<sup>24</sup> In its manners, morals, government, and religion, ancient Britain and Saxon England held little for Hume to admire.

Norman rule introduced improvement in "literature and politeness, law and arts" from France. But the feudal institutions introduced by the Normans were causes of civil war and anarchy. England was now subject to the oppression of the barons, and frequent rebellions arising from their animosity against the monarchy and each other.<sup>25</sup> In turn, baronial license influenced the disorderly conduct of the people. Thus, although the Magna Carta of 1215 had some civilising influence on government in restraining the "barbarous license" of kings and nobles,<sup>26</sup> it did not mark the beginning of civilised society in England, but rather set the stage for the barbarities of the later middle ages.

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<sup>19</sup> Hume, "Of the Origin of Government," in *Essays*, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Henry St. James, Viscount Bolingbroke, *A Dissertation upon Parties*, in *Political Writings*, ed. David Armitage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> Hume, *History*, vol. 1, pp. 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 371-2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 487-8.

Even when the Magna Carta was fully established and recognised in England by the time of the reign of Edward III (1327-1377), Hume judged that “the government, at best, was only a barbarous monarchy, not regulated by any fixed maxims, or bounded by any certain undisputed rights, which in practice were regularly observed.” The principles by which the king, barons, commons, and clergy governed over their respective jurisdictions “were opposite and incompatible,” such that the weakness of one part of government at a particular time strengthened the others—though the prevailing superstition of the people ensured the power of the clergy.<sup>27</sup> After the strong rule of Edward III, the weakness of his successor Richard II led to his deposition and murder. Hume compared the 1688 revolution, in which “a great and civilised nation...deliberately vindicat[ed] its established privileges,” with this “turbulent and barbarous aristocracy, plunging headlong from the extremes of one faction into those of another.”<sup>28</sup> Barbarous monarchy thus led to barbarous aristocracy; the irregular rule of the king gave way to factional strife among the nobility. The final outcome of baronial conflict was the wars of the Roses, “a scene of horror and bloodshed” and “savage manners.”<sup>29</sup> For Hume, the fragile, incongruent constitution and the final civil war demonstrated the barbarity throughout the middle ages in England.

The bloody climax of the middle ages took place at the same time as the “dawn of civility and the sciences.” By the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the arts and sciences were being revived after centuries of darkness. Hume associated science and civility, and wrote that the latter “has so close a connexion with virtue and humanity, and...as it is a sovereign antidote against superstition, is also the most effectual remedy against vice and disorders of every kind.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, the growth of learning is linked to moral, religious, and political progress. A general improvement in arts and sciences is also an improvement in manners, opinions, and institutions—all under the rubric of “civilisation.”

Nevertheless, England’s escape from barbarous medievalism did not preclude various resurgences of barbarism in the early modern period. Hume decried the “tyranny and barbarity” of such Tudor monarchs as Henry VIII,<sup>31</sup> and even the quasi-despotic rule of Elizabeth, who despite her considerable virtues presided over a government which “bore...some resemblance to that of Turkey at present,” especially in measures prejudicial to commerce.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the reign of Mary exemplified the “savage barbarity” of religious persecution in the 16<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>33</sup> reflecting the fact that civilised politics in Hume’s view demands a policy of religious toleration. Notwithstanding these barbarous aspects of Tudor England, however, Tudor absolutism tended to depress the power of the nobility while the liberty of the commons slowly gained ascendancy. Furthermore, as navigation and commerce expanded throughout Western Europe, industry and arts flourished: the nobles in turn “dissipated their fortunes in expensive pleasures” as the arts of luxury increased, while the commons tended to acquire and invest their new fortunes amidst the growth of commercial society.<sup>34</sup> Morals improved in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 283-4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 320-1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 518-19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 322.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, p. 360.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, p. 433.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 80-1.

consequence, as evinced by the decline in executions since Henry VIII's reign.<sup>35</sup> And that the Tudor monarchs patronised learning and were authors themselves showed the esteem of the arts at this time, with positive effects (alongside the growth of commerce) on general manners and culture.<sup>36</sup> Thus Elizabethan England may have resembled despotic Turkey, but it was in general a civilised despotism at worst.

It was consequently in the Tudor age that the contrast between the English and their barbarous neighbours was, perhaps for the first time, particularly striking. Hume's decision to focus on English history arose out of a conviction that the Scots before Edward I's dominion over them in 1291 hardly had "any real history," since the "government of Scotland had been continually exposed to those factions and convulsions, which are incident to all barbarous, and to many civilised nations..."<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Hume regarded pre-17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland as a barbarous society: during Henry VIII's reign, the duke of Albany who sought to possess the regency of Scotland found that the kingdom was less than a "civil polity"; that "rapine and violence" were common and honoured among the clans; and that the "spirit of revenge" was a chief passion "among that uncultivated people."<sup>38</sup> Scotland continued to be a "country unacquainted with law and order" throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>39</sup> only James VI's league with England could ensure domestic tranquillity, not only in the face of the perpetually feuding nobility in Scotland, but also the new and barbaric "spirit of fanaticism" which seized upon the minds of the Scots in the age of Calvin and Knox.<sup>40</sup>

The Irish fare even worse in Hume's account. While the rest of Europe rose from barbarism to civilised life, "the rudeness and ignorance of the Irish were extreme," such that their "customs and manners approached nearer those of savages than of barbarians." The dominion of England over Ireland since the 12<sup>th</sup> century was merely nominal, and so the foreign rulers failed to influence the manners of the inhabitants. Hume blamed the English not for oppressing the Irish but rather for failing to civilise them; instead, they "marked them out as aliens and as enemies." Despite their not having been completely civilised by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the English were sufficiently advanced over the Irish that both would have benefited from the civilising of the latter. Thus the Irish rebellion of 1584 can be blamed on the half-hearted imperialism of the English.<sup>41</sup>

Although Stuart England was beset by rebellion, civil war, and revolution, the conflicts of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were of a civilised, though divided, people. In his note to an account of the struggles between parliament and monarchy in the reign of James I, Hume contrasted the court and country parties (the ancestors of the Tories and Whigs) which formed in this period with the warring groups in feudal times. Although they may have resembled the factions of the nobility and commons in the middle ages, the contest between the modern parties has remained the "real cause" of the "permanent life and vigour" of the English constitution, despite the dangers they have posed to political stability. The court and country parties represent principles of authority and liberty in the constitution, and are not to be confused with the "authority and anarchy" arising from the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 329.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 383-6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 83.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 116-17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, p. 182.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, p. 221.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 310-12.



rancour of a “parliament composed of barbarians...uninstructed by study, conversation, or travel; ignorant of their laws and history, and unacquainted with the situation of all foreign nations.”<sup>42</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> century England was beset with religious strife, but Hume emphasises that the English revolutionaries were infected from without by the “barbarous zeal and theological fervour” of the Scots (a far less civilised people than the English at that time);<sup>43</sup> that despite their fanaticism, the radical Christian sects espoused civilised principles of toleration (such that “so reasonable a doctrine owed its origin, not to reasoning, but to the height of extravagance and fanaticism”);<sup>44</sup> and that as awful as the civil war was, “the events of this period are less distinguished by the atrocious deeds either of treachery or cruelty, than were ever any intestine discords, which had so long a continuance,” owing to the “national character of that people”—the civilised English.<sup>45</sup>

After 1688, England reached a zenith of civilised politics. Although Hume criticised the commons and peers for deposing James II on the fallacious grounds that he had breached the original contract between king and people,<sup>46</sup> he lauded the state of the constitution after 1688: “a more uniform edifice was at last erected: The monstrous inconsistency, so visible between the ancient Gothic parts of the fabric and the recent plans of liberty, was fully corrected: And to their mutual felicity, king and people were finally taught to know their proper boundaries.”<sup>47</sup> This constitution served properly to balance liberty and authority in their modern, civilised forms—possible only because of the gradual revolution of manners since late medieval times. In consequence, Scotland could only benefit from its union with England. After 1707, the Scots “have happily attained the experience of a government perfectly regular, and exempt from all violence and injustice.”<sup>48</sup> Because England had reached a proper balance in its constitution, Scotland was able to reap the rewards of merging itself with its civilised neighbour to the south. It could thereby enjoy the conjunction of liberty with order, the increase of industry and commerce, the cultivation of learning, and the abatement of religious strife in England.<sup>49</sup> Great Britain was an exemplar of an enlightened polity.

18<sup>th</sup> century Britain would therefore seem to have the honour and duty to govern a civilising global empire. Even in the reign of James I, the English colonies of America could already be regarded as “established on the noblest footing that has been known in any age or nation.” Unlike the often barbarous vices of the Spanish conquistadors in the new world, the English colonists transported the spirit of freedom to North America; and they benefited the mother-country in navigation, trade, and even populousness, while seeking “freedom amidst these savage desarts [sic].” British dominion, wrote Hume in 1754, was maintained by “mild government and great naval force.”<sup>50</sup> In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Hume was thus optimistic about the benefits of empire both to the mother country and to the colonies. As for the native inhabitants, they were clearly no better than savages who could hardly contest the rightness of colonial rule based on enlightened

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 556-7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 333-4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 526.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 475-6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>49</sup> Hume, “Of the Protestant Succession,” in *Essays*, p. 508.

<sup>50</sup> Hume, *History*, vol. 5, pp. 146-8.

principles of government. Hume had little time for peoples in the savage state of society, and notwithstanding his opposition to slavery, was content to uphold the notion that Whites are culturally and perhaps naturally superior to other races, especially Blacks.<sup>51</sup> Hume's thought would seem to justify quite easily British global empire.

Hume's implicit justification for empire is complicated, however, by his growing antagonism towards the English in his later years. In the *History of England*, Hume compared the manners of the English under the Stuarts with those of the English in his day:

The manners of the nation were agreeable to the monarchical government, which then prevailed; and contained not that strange mixture, which, at present, distinguishes England from all other countries. Such violent extremes were then unknown, of industry and debauchery, frugality and profusion, civility and rusticity, fanaticism and scepticism.<sup>52</sup>

That the English after 1688 “enjoyed if not the best system of government, at least the most entire system of liberty, that ever was known amongst mankind”<sup>53</sup> indicated the seeds of instability in English cultural and political life. Hume wrote that the English “have the least of a national character” because of the intense mutability of their culture over time,<sup>54</sup> which can be interpreted as implying that the English could easily lose that balance of liberty and authority achieved in the post-1688 constitution as they tended towards excessive freedom. Moreover, as the progress of arts and sciences—at least in politics and natural philosophy—may have reached a certain perfection in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the English may have been undergoing the inevitable decline which would succeed that high point.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, by the end of his life, Hume frequently characterised the English of his day as barbarians.<sup>56</sup> Soon after the publication of the final volumes of the *History of England* (volumes 1 and 2), Hume compared English learning and culture unfavourably with that of the French.<sup>57</sup> Hume's Francophilia was motivated not only by the much more favourable reception of his works on the opposite side of the Channel than in the south, but also by events in England which showed its resurgent barbarism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Writing in response to François Turgot's hope for the perpetual progress of society, Hume suggested that the Wilkes affair of May 1768, in which a London mob rallied in support of the disgraced Anglo-chauvinist MP, indicated that English liberty had taken the form of license and disorder.<sup>58</sup> The licentious mob of the English people influenced the government's decisions to rush into every unnecessary war, thereby increasing the public debt to the likely ruin of the nation.<sup>59</sup> In particular, Britain's botched conduct in

<sup>51</sup> Hume, “Of National Characters,” in *Essays*, p. 208 n. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Hume, *History*, vol. 5, p. 132.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 531.

<sup>54</sup> Hume, “Of National Characters,” p. 207.

<sup>55</sup> See Hume, “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” in *Essays*, pp. 134-5.

<sup>56</sup> See J.G.A. Pocock, “Hume and the American Revolution: the Dying Thoughts of a North Briton,” in David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robison, eds., *McGill Hume Studies* (Montreal: Austin Hills Press, 1979), pp. 325-43.

<sup>57</sup> Hume, *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 497-8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 180-1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

dealings with the American colonists was a sign that its empire at least in America was insupportable. Hume had mused in 1768 that he would like to see “America and the East Indies revolted totally & finally, the Revenue reduc’d to half, public Credit fully discredited by Bankruptcy, the third of London in Ruins, and the rascally Mob subdu’d.”<sup>60</sup> By 1775, a year before his death, Hume sided with the Americans in their push for independence, and declared that it would be best to “let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper...”; for how can one expect “that a form of Government will maintain an Authority at 3000 Miles distance when it cannot make itself be respected or even treated with common Decency at home”?<sup>61</sup> Hume complained that “it has been my Misfortune to write in the Language of the most stupid and factious Barbarians in the world...”<sup>62</sup> Scotland may have been the “historical nation,” but certainly not England, which had “sunk in Stupidity and Barbarism and Faction...”<sup>63</sup> England’s claim to be a beacon of civilisation, and implicitly its right to maintain an empire to civilise other parts of the world, were deeply questionable in Hume’s eyes. While his historical and philosophical work championed the emergence of modern civilisation out of barbarism, he had become keenly sensitive to 18<sup>th</sup> century England’s decline into barbarism. Thus Hume can hardly be said to have provided an unambiguous defence at least of British imperialism, given the rot that had set in at the heart of the freest of civilised countries.

### **William Robertson’s Benign Imperialism**

Edward Gibbon wrote in 1788 that he wished to be placed in “the triumvirate” of historians which included Hume and Robertson.<sup>64</sup> Although Gibbon has risen to public pre-eminence among 18<sup>th</sup> century historians, while the historical works of Robertson and Hume are read only by professional scholars, his remark reflects the high position accorded to Robertson in his own time. Hume regarded him as in some sense his intellectual heir in the writing of history, but Robertson’s work does not significantly advance the historical categories of savagery, barbarism, and civilisation beyond Hume’s philosophical history. Nevertheless, his more conventional treatment of historical change relative to Hume, doubtless reflective of his more orthodox occupations as cleric (for a time) and principal of the University of Edinburgh, has not entailed any dearth of scholarly controversy over his stance on empire. For example, Stewart J. Brown praises Robertson’s tolerance and “vision of world history which celebrated the essential unity of humankind,”<sup>65</sup> whereas Karen O’Brien depicts his later tendency to “imperialist complacencies, albeit of a free-trading and tolerant society”;<sup>66</sup> and more radically, Bruce P. Lenman rebukes the “enlightened condescension of the authoritarian liberal” as he situates Robertson “among the architects of Indian Removal in the North American

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>64</sup> Qtd. in Stewart J. Brown, “Introduction,” in Stewart J. Brown, ed., *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, “William Robertson (1721-1793) and the Scottish Enlightenment,” in Brown, ed., p. 35.

<sup>66</sup> Karen O’Brien, “Robertson’s place in the development of eighteenth-century narrative history,” in Brown, ed., p. 91.

republic.”<sup>67</sup> These varying interpretations arguably arise from the blurring of cosmopolitanism and imperialism in Robertson’s writing, based on the enlightened Scottish view of history inherited from Hume.

Robertson’s career as historian began with the *History of Scotland* (1759), but while he and Hume corresponded at some length on various points of Scottish history, especially on questions concerning Mary, Queen of Scots, Robertson substantially agreed with Hume’s views on Scottish relative to English history.<sup>68</sup> Thus Robertson was content simply to narrate the various events during the reigns of Mary and James VI; his chief remarks concerning barbarism and civilisation in the *History of Scotland* concern the “first ages” of its “dark and fabulous” history. Early Scottish history should be seen as the “infancy and early youth” of the nation (which “cannot be recollected and deserve not to be remembered”).<sup>69</sup> Feudal Scotland was also barbaric: kings enjoyed little authority, there was almost no civil jurisdiction as modern Scots would understand it, and commerce was extremely limited in a society that fostered a martial rather than commercial spirit.<sup>70</sup> Government in feudal times was “extremely imperfect among a martial people unacquainted with the arts of peace and debate”; real power rested not with parliaments but with “haughty barons.”<sup>71</sup> Like Hume, Robertson interpreted Scottish civil and cultural life as barbaric and uncivilised for most of its history, and so it is not surprising that he like most of his contemporaries supported its union with England.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, in the “View of the Progress of Society in Europe,” the introductory section to *The History of the Reign of Emperor Charles V* (1769), Robertson contrasted the martial spirit, violence, and vengeance of the barbarous nations of Europe with Roman civilisation.<sup>73</sup> The age succeeding the barbarian conquests over the Romans were dark ages characterised by ignorance and superstition, and an adherence to a degenerate form of Christianity (reflecting Robertson’s emphasis on civilised religion). Any of the simpler virtues they may have possessed as uncivilised nations were destroyed by the feudal institutions erected in the middle ages. Robertson cited the views of “an elegant and profound historian,” i.e., Hume, that Western civilisation had hit a trough around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, after which there was a slow progress from barbarism to civilised refinement. Despite the folly of the Crusades, they enlarged the minds of the Crusaders who travelled beyond Europe and encountered the polished manners of the Arabs. Subsequently, the “barbarism and ignorance of European society” began to be dispelled.<sup>74</sup> The recovery of ancient learning and jurisprudence, as well as the progress of commerce, refined the manners of the Europeans and brought them to the established order, laws, and humanity present in European civilisation at the time of Charles V. Unlike the original state of society, where desires are limited and natural industry in a

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<sup>67</sup> Bruce P. Lenman, “‘From savage to Scot’ via the French and the Spaniards: Principal Robertson’s Spanish sources,” in Brown, ed., p. 209.

<sup>68</sup> See Hume, *Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 287-95.

<sup>69</sup> William Robertson, *The History of Scotland* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856), p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> See Colin Kidd, “The ideological significance of Robertson’s *History of Scotland*,” in Brown, ed., pp. 122-3.

<sup>73</sup> William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of Emperor Charles V* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1838), pp. 10-12.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-18.

rude state, European nations ascended to a state of flourishing arts and advanced commerce, with England at the highest rank among commercial societies. In a Humean and Montesquieuan vein, Robertson claimed that commerce cures prejudices, polishes manners, unites members of society, and disposes the people to peace.<sup>75</sup> As we saw with Hume, Robertson emphasised the economic basis of the rise from barbarism to civilisation, and the moral and intellectual benefits of commerce.

Robertson's *History of America* (1777) is particularly revealing of his views on empire. At the outset of his account of European discoveries in the Americas and subsequent colonialism, Robertson remarks on navigation and commerce as sufficiently developed only in civilised nations, and in modern rather than ancient civilisations.<sup>76</sup> Modern European exploration indicates a high degree of civilisation. Robertson added a religious overlay to European expansion, writing that divine providence decreed that at a certain moment in history, "men would pass the limits within which they were long confined," and that the first of the nations to send out such men would be Portugal.<sup>77</sup> As Nicholas Phillipson points out, unlike Hume (as well as Voltaire and Gibbon), Robertson had an "abiding belief in providence and the progress of Christianity." But Phillipson also notes that Robertson's views on providence were of his time, given his notion (as outlined in a sermon of 1755) that revelations in the modern world "would follow the material progress of civilisation."<sup>78</sup> European expansion was providentially ordained only because Western European nations had reached a sufficiently advanced stage of civilisation in which ships and men could be sent around the world.

Accordingly, Robertson's history looks favourably on imperialism in the Americas when in accordance with civilised virtues. In his review of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, he describes the state of humankind as being ruder than that found in Europe or Asia. Apart from the Aztecs and Incas, the native inhabitants live in a state so destitute of arts and industry that it is as if there were no inhabitants there at all; and thus it is no wonder that the Europeans encountered what seemed an empty wilderness. Echoing Locke, Robertson writes of human labour as improving and embellishing the earth, as well as making it "more wholesome and friendly to life."<sup>79</sup> The natives are in contrast extremely rude and savage, sharing a number of characteristics in common with the barbarous ancestors of modern Europe in both their simple arts and superstitious beliefs—though relative to the flocks, herbs, and simple property of the German barbarians, the native Americans live in the most primitive and rudest stage of society.<sup>80</sup> Ignorant of the agriculturally-based societies in many parts of the Americas prior to European contact, Robertson's work applies a single model of historical progress to Eurasia and the Americas which ranks the latter at the lowest level, and presumably in need of improvement by enlightened Europeans.

And yet it would be inaccurate to say that Robertson's history was intended simply as an apology for European imperialism. It is indeed the case that Robertson thought the native Americans to be savages, but he was wary of contempt simply because

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-41.

<sup>76</sup> William Robertson, *The History of America* (Philadelphia: Johnson and Warner, 1812), pp. 4-5.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>78</sup> Nicholas Phillipson, "Providence and progress: an introduction to the historical thought of William Robertson," in Brown, ed., pp. 68-9.

<sup>79</sup> Robertson, *America*, pp. 240-1.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 250-1, 262-3.

one society is judged primitive or barbarous by another. The historian should be impartial and recognise that “in every stage of society, the faculties, sentiments, and desires of men are accommodated to their own state” such that each human culture has its own standards of excellence. Robertson warned that observers of primitive communities are rarely free of “vulgar prejudices” themselves (though he may not have heeded his own warning), and that the conquerors of the Americas, especially the Spaniards, could hardly claim to be much advanced in learning or morals over the vanquished.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, he judged the natives’ forced transition to civilised life to be too sudden, too violent; as “nature forms the mind to each condition,” it is unnatural to civilise a people suited to an earlier stage of society.<sup>82</sup> Robertson was condescending in his judgement of the natives of America, but his belief in European superiority did not entail an unambiguous defence of imperial ventures in the wider world.

Like Herder, Robertson found the diversity of peoples around the globe to be extremely instructive. “To complete the history of the human mind,” Robertson wrote, “and attain perfect knowledge of its nature and operation, we must contemplate men in all various situations; and in progress through different stages of society from the gradual advance from an infant state of civil life to its maturity and decline.”<sup>83</sup> Thus in his final work, *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge Which the Ancients had of India* (1791), Robertson displayed his admiration for India’s ancient and rich civilisation, urging “the European imperial powers then present in India to avoid the abuses in power that had so darkened the European expansion to the Americas and to show respect for the rich and ancient cultural heritage of India.”<sup>84</sup> His appeal—based on an interpretation of Hinduism as a form of religious pluralism—was hardly anti-imperialist, as he maintained that India, as humane as it is, should still be “civilised by the gentle pressures of commerce.”<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, Robertson’s imperial outlook was tied to a defence of free trade and commerce. In his works, the Scottish Enlightenment view of history provided principles by which to shape European imperialism towards a more humane conception of civilisation than that demonstrated by the conduct of earlier empires in the modern age.

### **Ferguson’s Questioning of Empire**

J.G.A. Pocock has remarked on the influence of Smith’s stadial theory of human development on Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). While Smith’s theory (especially as outlined in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*) generally follows the discourse of barbarism and civilisation in the histories of Hume and Robertson, Smith further distinguished the shepherd stage as a dynamic break with the hunting and gathering stage of the savage. By this means, Smith asserted an essential difference between shepherd-barbarians and the savages of the Americas, Polynesia, and Africa.<sup>86</sup> Ferguson accepted this distinction in the stadial theory, but put into question the assumption of other Scottish Enlightenment historians that modern society is morally superior to previous stages of society.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 264-6.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 377-9.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>84</sup> Brown, “Scottish Enlightenment,” p. 34.

<sup>85</sup> Phillipson, p. 73.

<sup>86</sup> Pocock, *Barbarism*, vol. 2, pp. 315-16.

Like Hume, Ferguson criticised state of nature theories as unhistorical, preferring instead to trace the development of the human species “from rudeness to civilisation.”<sup>87</sup> Ferguson thus contrasted the manners, commerce, and arts of civilised societies with the “civil disorders” attendant on earlier stages of society.<sup>88</sup> But he also pointed out the particular virtues of rude ages which have been lost in modern civilisation. Ferguson sought to correct the tendency of moderns to understand the original stage of humankind as merely a “negation of all our virtues.”<sup>89</sup> Rude societies are disorderly, violent, and ignorant, but their inhabitants enjoy a raw freedom of sorts, possess a public and martial spirit, and display the unique virtues of generosity and honour.<sup>90</sup> And while polite arts flourish in civilised societies, the poetry of rude societies such as the Homeric epics are unique forms unattainable in modern times.<sup>91</sup>

Ferguson subverted many of the assumptions of previous Enlightenment thinkers, but unlike Rousseau did not fashion a new state of nature theory nor depict the history of civil society as a corruption of the species.<sup>92</sup> He presented modern civilisation in terms of gains and losses, and so despite what Pocock calls his “maverick” status among his contemporaries,<sup>93</sup> he essentially shared the Scottish Enlightenment model of history while questioning the moral validity of aspects of civilised life. Thus he adhered to Smith’s distinction between savages who have no concept of property and barbarians for whom property is “a principal object of care and desire.”<sup>94</sup> But Ferguson also remarked on the violence of the transition from savage to barbarian stages, such that every barbarian nation “is a band of robbers, who prey without restraint, on their neighbours.”<sup>95</sup> And in comparing ancients and moderns, the commerce and arts of modern civilisation may be bemoaned for the loss of public zeal in favour of individual rights.<sup>96</sup>

The loss of public spirit is a significant flaw in modern societies, according to Ferguson. As Pocock notes, Ferguson was a kind of vitalist, for whom society is most vigorous when human energy is directed towards public ends. Unlike Hume, Robertson, or Smith, who regarded primal energy as barbaric and dangerous, Ferguson feared that a loss of such energy would result in corruption and decline.<sup>97</sup> By weakening the active virtues and public spirit, civilisation could descend into decadence and despotism;<sup>98</sup> signs of decline were evident in the gross inequalities and vices of commercial society, despite its pretensions to equal rights.<sup>99</sup> Although Ferguson was much more critical of the moral effects of commerce than Hume, he echoed the latter’s concern that modern European nations were endangered by their reliance on standing armies (a sign of the lack of public

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<sup>87</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1966), pp. 1-2.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 94-5, 105-6.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172-3.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*.

<sup>93</sup> Pocock, *Barbarism*, p. 331.

<sup>94</sup> Ferguson, p. 82.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-200, 203.

<sup>97</sup> Pocock, *Barbarism*, pp. 330-1.

<sup>98</sup> Ferguson, pp. 217-25.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186-8; and see pp. 246-52.

spirit) and their growing public debt (a result of excessive luxury). As with ancient Rome, modern Europe could fall prey to vigorous barbarians from without.<sup>100</sup>

Ferguson took European imperialism as a sign of modern corruption. While public spirit is a manifestation of positive public energy, imperial expansion is a negative exertion that only serves to unleash bloodshed around the world.<sup>101</sup> Imperialism is a ruinous maxim, as the spread of “effeminate empires” (as opposed to masculine public spiritedness) from the “sea of Corea” to the Atlantic can only lead to the servitude of the conquering nations of European to their own armies and to each other.<sup>102</sup> As an empire expands, moreover, the remnants of public spirit are vitiated over vast distances; not only the conquered but also the conquerors eventually lose their liberty, as demonstrated by the descent of the Roman Empire into despotism.<sup>103</sup>

It would seem, then, that Ferguson stood out among Scottish Enlightenment historians as an anti-imperialist. Certainly he was more questioning of empire than Robertson, and may have gone further than Hume in foreseeing the dangers of empire. But his critique, however gratifying, is limited in scope and depth. Unlike Rousseau, Ferguson’s anti-imperial remarks are not tied to a profound critique of civilisation, though these two writers shared a certain republicanism in their critical accounts of modern society. It is not clear precisely where Ferguson wanted to take his critique, and how seriously the reader can take his apparent desire to infuse public spirit and vitality into modern society. Pocock argues that Ferguson’s critique is moral rather than political—there is no equivalent in Ferguson’s thought to Rousseau’s *Social Contract*—and there is little account of religion relative to barbarism and civilisation.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, his unease at civilisation paid insufficient attention to historical particularities. By writing a moralising conjectural history, Ferguson’s depiction of modern civilisation suffered from a certain abstractness and incompleteness relative to his intellectual forebears. He may have been an anti-imperialist thinker in some respects, but his theoretical insights and the probity of his critique were somewhat limited given his incomplete engagement with Scottish Enlightenment history.

## Conclusion

In the three historians examined above, we have seen a common discourse concerning the rise of civilisation from stages of barbarism and even savagery. But their analyses of the implications of the stages of history for empire are strikingly divergent. Hume’s ambivalence over the Anglo-British empire, Robertson’s espousal of a benign form of imperialism, and Ferguson’s vitalist critique of imperial expansion suggest that one cannot without qualifications categorise Scottish Enlightenment history, much less *the* Enlightenment, as simply for or against empire. Indeed, this paper has shown that even the premises of “anti-imperial Enlightenment thought” as outlined by Muthu are present in varying degrees in histories by Hume, Robertson, and Ferguson without a necessary connection to anti-imperialism per se. Nevertheless, what these authors—and many others in the Enlightenment period—do share is a general (though not

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp. 103, 230-5.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-4.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 271-3, 277-80.

<sup>104</sup> Pocock, *Barbarism*, p. 348.



unambivalent) recognition of the benefits enjoyed in modern commercial civilisation, which is linked at least for Hume and Robertson to an approbation of the commercial empires of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this respect, the attitude of Scottish Enlightenment historians and others to empire is not so different from espousals of economic globalisation in our day; and so it is illuminating to ponder our own complicity in a form of Enlightened imperialism.