

THE MATTER OF ENLIGHTENMENT

LINDA KIRK

University of Sheffield

ABSTRACT. *Recent work on the Enlightenment continues to bear out the importance of context in shaping both what is written and how it is read. In the case of the French Revolution, largely thanks to the work of Robert Darnton, studies have come to focus on how, if at all, different layers and styles of dissidence helped to bring down the French monarchy. But not all writing has, or need be suspected of, such an obvious or immediate outcome. This period, for instance, sees the birth of ‘philosophical’ history, as John Pocock and others have made us aware. Here again, contexts and individual experience shape what is studied and written, but it is clear that the project common to the best-selling work of, for instance, Gibbon, Hume and Robertson was to explain how civil society emerged and thrived. This inquiry, and what it says about the separate states and common principles of Europe then and now, is unfinished business; so, too, is determining what historical knowing is, and cannot be. What the eighteenth century undeniably saw, even from the slightly educated, was a growing appetite for understanding and for improvement: these have proved necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for modernity.*

In the early 1770s Robert Bell, a Scot, sold an octavo edition of William Robertson’s *Charles V* in the north American colonies as a patriotic, accessible work, ‘at a price so moderate, that the MAN of the WOODS, as well as the MAN of the COURT’ would relish it.¹ His view of his readers’ tastes, his vulgar marketing skills, and his confidence that a new people needed history to form their minds illuminate several facets of current work on eighteenth-century culture. Scholars of the Enlightenment still follow the tradition of pursuing published writings backwards through manuscript drafts and letters to an elite circle;² but what is now fashionable is to look outwards and downwards as well, to the reactions of the intended audience. Beyond this, of course, lies the contested territory of public opinion, where elite discourse is not only received and popularized, but moulded and transmitted again. This review will address the connected questions – thrown up by Robert Bell’s enterprise – of the emergence of ‘philosophical’ history writing; the Enlightenment’s apparent dissolution into separate regional episodes, its popular face, and political impact.

¹ Richard B. Sher, ‘Charles V and the book trade: an episode in Enlightenment print culture’, in Stewart J. Brown, ed., *William Robertson and the expansion of empire* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 184–92.

² For a work to remain in manuscript signalled different things in different places: in early eighteenth-century Naples, pieces presented to a noble patron might well be written in different inks, and set out in style, with no apparent sense that breaking into print was a desirable next step; much of what circulated in manuscript in France was evading official oversight. Harold Samuel Stone, *Vico’s cultural history: the production and transmission of ideas in Naples, 1685–1750* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne, 1997), and Miguel Benítez, *La face cachée des lumières: recherches sur les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l’âge classique* (Paris and Oxford, 1996).

I

One of the defining characteristics of modernity is the belief that things can change and should change:³ the Enlightenment has traditionally been seen as the era when this belief first captured the minds of significant numbers of opinion-formers.⁴ In this version, a linked cluster of ideas erupted into historical experience, and from then on a steady-state *mentalité* in (say) politics, or in medicine, or in artisanal modes of production became conceptually rare and culturally backward. Whether we followed Peter Gay in seeing the emancipation from Christianity as the motor of the process,⁵ or placed greater emphasis on the impact of international trading and the costs of military expenditure,⁶ we were content with a clear picture of the eighteenth century, and especially the years from 1760 to 1800, as a time when irreversible changes took place in the culture of Europe, creating a pattern which was exported at a variety of speeds to the rest of the world.

Work on the eighteenth century, like that on most others, has moved from attaching a working label to an era ('The Age of Reason') through contesting individual ascriptions of membership, to challenging the concept itself. People may attempt to identify a core, of which certain statements are almost always true, and a periphery, where more vagueness is legitimate. When a concept can be identified with the teaching of one individual – Luther, or Marx, for instance – there is at least a case for supposing that we should be able to agree about the core, or about its earliest version. This has never been true of the Enlightenment.⁷ From the early 1750s Rousseau subverted and criticized the developing dogmas of other *philosophes*. Was he a member of the movement or not? If he was, what might the core of the Enlightenment be taken to be?

The dominance of Frenchmen and readers of French in eighteenth-century culture has suggested that the concept might be geographically understood. Protestant Germans, Scots, or new Americans, for instance, seemed able to strip out the irreligious strand of French enlightened thought while presenting an account of the world, its past and its future, which in many other respects mirrored that of Voltaire. Were they deviants, or backwoodsmen? Were the English, or the Italians, so culturally distinct as to fail to figure in this story at all? Finding different enlightenments when we studied

³ See Andreas A. M. Kinneging, *Aristocracy, antiquity and history: classicism in political thought* (New Jersey, 1997).

⁴ Many have explored the processes by which the term gained acceptance: see, for instance, Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 1, 'What is Enlightenment?'. For an outline of the position that the term has been over-used, and misinterpreted, see John Lough, 'Reflections on *Enlightenment* and *lumières*', *British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, 8 (1985), pp. 1–15.

⁵ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: an interpretation* (2 vols., New York, 1966–9). Volume 1 is called *The rise of modern paganism*.

⁶ See, for instance, Leonard Krieger, *Kings and philosophers, 1689–1789* (New York, 1970), and C. B. A. Behrens, *Society, government and the Enlightenment: the experiences of eighteenth-century France and Prussia* (New York, 1985).

⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1999). In the first volume, *The enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*, Pocock establishes that the process of Gibbon's intellectual formation took him from a Protestant enlightenment born out of reaction to Calvinism to an ironic, detached standpoint which had much in common with that of the Parisian enlightenment. Gibbon, unlike the Encyclopedists, retained a respect for the scholarship of the *érudits* which kept him permanently at odds with such brisk, under-evidenced accounts of the past as those with which Voltaire made his name as a historian.

‘the Enlightenment’ in national context,⁸ or indeed in contexts too small to have achieved nationhood, could not simply be represented as proof that peripheries are lively places.⁹ A complex series of arguments which have dominated the last thirty years in the realm of political ideas has taught us that ‘contexts’ are more than stages on which great thinkers performed or trampolines where they built up intellectual muscle tone.¹⁰ So geography alone cannot determine who, or where, may be judged bearers of the authentic message of enlightenment.¹¹

‘Contexts’ impose economic constraints. (Without some beginnings of markets and surpluses, full-time writing is rare; and printing, requiring skills, machines, and capital, is unrewarding.) ‘Contexts’ include known, experienced, and imaginable political arrangements: Andreas Kinning has usefully reminded us that, until perhaps 1800, for most thinkers the central problem of political theory was the relationship between aristocrats and a ruler. Consent, in a wider sense, was unimportant; virtue consisted of ordered behaviour which sought to conform to a common norm, and honour was a legitimate spring of action.¹² ‘Contexts’, however, may be different for different groups, classes, generations, and individuals, even when these people live at the same time and in the same space. Women, slaves, and resident aliens would have told distinctive stories about classical Athens. Rousseau the Genevan is less complex and puzzling a writer than Rousseau the international celebrity, or Rousseau the novice Parisian. His vision of politics as being subsumed in a brotherly framework of shared moral certainty makes more sense if you understand how Geneva’s General Council of all adult male householder citizens was meant to work. His understanding of men as innately good, corrupted by having to live in a fallen world, can be aligned with the newer, more cheerful Calvinism preached in Rousseau’s youth. He believed that modern democracy could not work except in small polities, with a strong shared culture and no great disparities between rich and poor: read by a Genevan in the 1760s, this bears a positive meaning inconceivable to a Londoner or Parisian. Likewise, we can see how, in context, people could warm to Rousseau’s prescription for a civil religion which shed doctrinal detail but made a broad ethical demand. By the standards of an eighteenth-century Genevan (not only one who had changed faith twice), this was modest and reasonable.¹³

⁸ Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in national context* (Cambridge, 1981), has chapters which examine cultures which only later belonged to fully formed nations, or which have not yet achieved this. John Robertson, ‘The Enlightenment above national context: political economy in eighteenth-century Scotland and Naples’, *Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), pp. 667–97, contends that we lose more than we gain by focusing on differences.

⁹ Recent studies where the place is a leading protagonist include Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: from the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749–1762* (Cambridge, 1997); Christopher Berry, *Social theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1997); and Stone, *Vico’s cultural history*.

¹⁰ Famously, Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas’, *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), pp. 3–53, and successive, increasingly linguistic, essays; the state of play can be seen in James Tully, ed., *Meaning and context: Quentin Skinner and his critics* (Princeton, 1988).

¹¹ John Robertson’s warm discussion of ‘Franco Venturi’s enlightenment’ (*Past and Present*, 137 (1992), pp. 183–206) carefully contrasts the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment with the ‘universalism’ of earlier Europe-wide cultural systems.

¹² Kinning, *Aristocracy, antiquity and history*, especially ch. 1, reverses the usual quest for the ‘modern’ concealed in the ancient or the early modern, and insists that the history of ‘not-modernity’ explains far more.

¹³ Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva*, reviewed by the present author in *History of Political Thought*, 18 (1997), pp. 738–41.

‘Contexts’, as we have seen in the myths which legitimate ethnic cleansing, manufacture as well as draw on tragic memories; religious certainties may be presented as timeless and unchallengeable, but some adding and shedding takes place within and between each generation. Upheavals like the Reformation or the Russian Revolution prove that sometimes, as disputed doctrine divides communities and families, inertly accepting standardized packages of belief ceases to be an option: even people of little consequence may then be compelled to make an individual commitment, to choose one context over another, and perhaps suffer for it.¹⁴ In certain contexts religious unbelief may seem unimaginable, but perhaps all we can say is that it was incapable of expression, or at least safe, public, expression.¹⁵ ‘Contexts’ shape the very language in which understandings are expressed: an epistemological innovator of Hume’s stature was tethered to familiar words like ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’ even as he sought to give them unprecedentedly precise meanings. Moving beyond your audience’s capacity to hear makes authorship so private as to be pointless.

We also know that reading a text involves more than passive reception of its message: each reader sieves and arranges what is on the page, often unconsciously discarding what cannot be assimilated into a world view or a master narrative which was, perhaps, acquired as much through informal acculturation as by what professionals might consider education. ‘Readers’, of course, include not only contemporaries in various settings,¹⁶ but succeeding generations. Later readers may be scholars, but need not be, and may have all manner of axes to grind: for instance, recent writing on eighteenth-century historians (considered below) draws, not always explicitly, on a shifting and current debate about narrative and imposed meaning.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Christina Lerner’s argument in her *Enemies of God: the witch-hunt in Scotland* (Oxford, 1983), especially p. 25.

¹⁵ Perhaps because he has spent so long working in the area, Harold Samuel Stone records without excited comment the continuing place of the Index and Inquisition in Naples’s cultural life while Vico was at work. Such a Naples was Vico’s context; immersion in its records has made it the context for Stone’s reading of Vico. See *Vico’s cultural history*, especially chapters 2 and 11, and the forthcoming Girolamo Imbruglia, *Naples in the eighteenth century: the birth and death of a nation state* (Cambridge, 2000). Alan Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729* (Princeton, 1990) (in what was then said to be vol. 1, ‘The orthodox sources of disbelief’), examines what Frenchmen in that era supposed atheism to mean, and the dangerous territory they were led into by their attempts to counter it.

¹⁶ Stone, *Vico’s cultural history*, especially pp. 137 and 267–80, tells us that people discussed as well as bought books in Neapolitan bookshops; and that rioters could target specific bookshops for destruction.

¹⁷ Here the problem is posed in Hayden White’s *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), and amongst various studies which do, or do not, engage with his argument are Suzanne Gearhart, *The open boundary of history and fiction: a critical approach to the French Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1984); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the truth about history* (New York, 1995); Richard J. Evans, *In defence of history* (London, 1997); Patrick Joyce, ‘The return of history: postmodernism and the politics of academic history in Britain’, *Past and Present*, 158 (1998) pp. 207–35; Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997); Bridget Hill, *The republican virago: the life and times of Catherine Macaulay, Historian* (Oxford, 1992); and David Saunders, ‘History teaching in late eighteenth-century Russia’, *British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, 10 (1987), pp. 139–51.

II

Any account of complexity blurs clarity, and the Enlightenment, in becoming 'enlightenments' became harder to understand and to explain.¹⁸ Far more important, however, has been the development of alternative visions which assert either that the evidence adds up to something else entirely or that quite different types of evidence need to be examined.

The most obvious recent change is today's insistence that it is not enough to examine and re-examine the work of a small group of canonical leading authors. True, Maurice Cranston's 1984 Carlyle lectures still set out a traditional pantheon of six great names and explored their political theories,¹⁹ but before then the principal evidence-shift towards the lesser-known and the under-recorded voices of the time was underway. We have thus been led to explore eighteenth-century writers, and readers, who did not merely transmit 'the Enlightenment', like a Christmas pudding safe in its basin and cloth, but who ate one version and then adjusted the recipe, making it cheaper and simpler, or added another dish to an enlightened pot-luck supper, or who campaigned against all puddings and the harm they did.²⁰ This, in the magisterial studies of Robert Darnton, has led us variously to Grub Street, to the wiles of provincial booksellers forced to trade profit against danger, and into the coarsening of political rhetoric made salacious and accessible through the 'forbidden book' trade. More complicated than this widening of the scope of those writings which may be deemed 'enlightened' or 'enlightening-in-impact' is the attempt to explore the ways in which people read what they bought or borrowed. We may prefer to resist that understanding of 'philosophique' which was shared by the weary police of Paris and by porters risking the galleys with bales of unbound sheets: for them 'philosophique' amalgamated scurrility and pornography with science and epistemology. But an older, more strait-laced reading can be defended. 'Philosophique' has long been taken to mean not just 'concerned with the problems now labelled those of formal philosophy', but also 'enquiring, sceptical, optimistic, rational and secular'. There is no obvious need to abandon this reading: not least, on Darnton's own figures, Voltaire remains the best-selling author in his (1780s) list, although no single work of Voltaire outsold Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440*.

At stake here is more than adding extra names to a list of eighteenth-century authors we ought to read. (This sense of an ever-lengthening agenda in scholarship owes something, of course, to the need of thesis-writers to locate unworked materials.)²¹ It is not only that Darnton has pursued, successfully and for many years, the trails of books

¹⁸ Three excellent recent surveys are Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* (Basingstoke, 1990); Outram, *The Enlightenment*; and Thomas Munck's *The Enlightenment: a comparative social history, 1721–1794* (London, 2000), which explores the impact of reformers' ideas chiefly in the more literate areas of Europe.

¹⁹ Maurice Cranston, *Philosophers and pamphleteers: political theorists of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1986).

²⁰ Darrin McMahon, 'The counter-enlightenment and the low-life of literature in pre-revolutionary France', *Past and Present*, 159 (1998), tells us of anti-Enlightenment writers who operated in the same milieu as the disaffected hacks whom we first encountered in Robert Darnton's 'The high Enlightenment and the low-life of literature in pre-revolutionary France', *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), pp. 81–115.

²¹ *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* has, over the last thirty years, given space to increasing numbers of studies of writers who would never find a place in the all-time World First Eleven. These often reveal connections and contradictions which shed light on their grander brothers and sisters.

and pamphlets sold ‘under the cloak’, assembling a list of bestsellers which we know reveals something about popular taste (or at least about that backed with purchasing power) because booksellers could not return material they failed to sell. He hopes that his findings will form part of a study of literature ‘as part of a general cultural system’. This, he believes, will make it ‘necessary to abandon preconceptions about great books by famous authors’.²² Here we seem to be confronted by a claim to have found a new core, a claim to have identified what the Enlightenment ‘is’, or perhaps ‘does’, which sidelines the rigorous, the rarefied, the long-studied, and honoured. Attitude and impact supersede logical coherence, scientific validity, or epistemological ingenuity as the measure of what makes the Enlightenment important.²³

Here we are moving towards much-traversed terrain: since 1789 people have wondered whether the writings of the *philosophes* caused the French Revolution.²⁴ Darnton and Chartier,²⁵ and many who work in this field, have turned the old allegation into something much more complicated. Put as simply as possible, it is now thought by many that when the French monarchy confronted a financial crisis which led directly to a constitutional impasse, the cheerful, well-informed irreverence of the *libellistes* helped move things on to a revolution. They had so sapped the sacral understanding of royalty, and had done so in ways which wove high culture and street songs into a pattern of contempt, that Louis XVI had no power base to retreat to when he lost Paris.²⁶ This is not the place to sum up, let alone explore, the orthodoxies and revisions of French Revolutionary historiography, but the connection between ideas and events, specifically between these ideas and these events, raises an important question about the Enlightenment. It is possible, even if currently unfashionable, to explain the outbreak of the French Revolution without tapping into any of the enlightenments. The events of 1789 could have been the product of economic, or political, forces which happened to coincide with a period of cultural innovation, but which flowed in entirely separate channels. Does this mean that the Enlightenment might not matter? Is the new ‘total culture’ version of late eighteenth-century debates (the politicians and bookmen, writings and speech, songs and squibs, posters, and slogans chalked on walls) of interest to us chiefly, or even solely, because of its role in bringing about the revolution? If it became clear that the colporteurs and

²² Robert Darnton, *The forbidden best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France* (London, 1996), p. xxi.

²³ See the twelve essays, mostly setting out and contesting Darnton’s subversion of what he says he almost accidentally dubbed the ‘High Enlightenment’, in Haydn T. Mason, ed., *The Darnton debate: books and revolutions in the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1999). This early phase of the phrase, and what it detonated, are sketched with graceful good humour in Darnton’s ‘Two paths through the social history of ideas’, pp. 251–94, the final and responsive essay in this collection of papers by and about Darnton, first published in 1998 as vol. 359 in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*.

²⁴ Kinneging, in *Aristocracy, antiquity and history*, seems to suppose that he is putting a fresh case when he urges that ancien régime France be studied in its own terms, and not solely as a prelude to the Revolution.

²⁵ For instance, Roger Chartier, *The cultural origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Durham, NC, and London, 1991).

²⁶ The argument is conveniently found in Jeffrey Merrick, *The desacralization of the French monarchy in the eighteenth century* (Baton Rouge, 1990), but has been more or less overtly incorporated into much recent writing. It has been challenged on a variety of grounds (not least, the difficulty of agreeing on the ‘sacredness’ of French monarchy before the late eighteenth century.) William Doyle is amongst the doubters; so are Daniel Gordon and Elizabeth Eisenstein: see their articles, ‘The great Enlightenment massacre’ and ‘Bypassing the Enlightenment: taking the underground route to the Revolution’, especially pp. 149–54 and 172–3, in Mason, ed., *The Darnton debate*.

Encyclopedists had somehow brought off a victimless crime, should we lose interest in them?

We already have versions of the Enlightenment-and-revolution story which are more subtle than Edmund Burke's outraged charge of cause and effect. One suggests that the kinds of rational, humane reform which lay at the core of the traditional understanding of the *philosophes'* ideas could have been introduced calmly, without rocking too many constitutional boats. Within a couple of generations, Europe might have seen improvements in education, criminal justice, taxation, religious toleration, and prosperity.²⁷ Slavery might have been abolished without waiting for the evangelicals to act. Many rulers, most memorably Leopold of Tuscany, were working their way through such a list, and the cataclysm in France was, perhaps, the accidental consequence of French impetuosity or the incompetence of Louis XVI. The gradualists' Enlightenment was not doomed from the outset; only once France had lurched from opportunity to tragedy was Burke's pessimism vindicated. And that need not have happened.

Louis XVI was, it has to be conceded, himself influenced by a modernizing humanitarianism, even if he missed the opportunity to update his coronation oath and insisted on undertaking to extirpate heresy when both the concept and the procedures had become quaint, as well as barbaric. Louis's later anxiety to seem decent and progressive leads us to consider another version of the relationship between the Enlightenment and revolution. By this account, the trouble lay precisely there – in the minds and consciences of late eighteenth-century rulers. Stimulated and intrigued, they learned to distrust old methods and to fear charges of despotism if they made legitimate use of their powers. They interfered and reformed, enough to arouse the alarm of the old political classes and to damage a popular, traditional vision of legitimacy which rested upon paternal responsibility.²⁸ They failed to create a new system where such reactions would be irrelevant. Confronted with opposition, they lost confidence in what they had seen as a way forward; it was by then too late to find the way back. If this account, in this version, is true, the *ancien régime* could have been saved by inertia, and the *philosophes'* list of good causes, even when prised away from Rousseau's subversive vision of moral brotherhood, turned out to be the road to hell.

There is a difficulty with the contention that sticking to the old ways would have been safe (as Burke put it: 'I put my foot into the tracks of our forefathers, where I can neither wander nor stumble'):²⁹ in the late eighteenth century in Europe and north America it was impossible to avoid tackling the different agenda which can loosely be categorized as reform. Almost all rulers faced an increase in population and consumption; they also

²⁷ T. C. W. Blanning, *Reform and revolution in Mainz, 1743–1803* (Cambridge, 1974), and Charles Ingrao, *The Hessian mercenary state: ideas, institutions and reform under Frederick, 1760–1785* (Cambridge, 1987), both offer examples of reformers whose gradualist projects had – seemingly – some chance of success. See also the overview of Marc Raeff, *The well-ordered police state: social and institutional change through law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800* (New Haven, 1984).

²⁸ William Doyle has published something like this argument in a number of places; see particularly his *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980), where on pp. 88–9 he discusses the failed attempts to deregulate the grain trade in these terms; an unpublished paper 'Avoiding Revolution' he gave in Bradford in March 1992 at a conference on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution focused precisely on this analysis.

²⁹ Burke, 'Speech on conciliation with the colonies', in B. W. Hill, ed., *Edmund Burke on government, politics and society* (Glasgow, 1975), p. 175.

had to respond to Europeans' increasing ability to dominate other continents, chiefly because of superior weaponry, and the opportunities presented by global markets. Consumption included not only the mirrors and watches that hint so heavily at changes in *mentalités*,³⁰ but many different forms of the written and printed word. If more people were living longer, for whatever reason, if the economy was understood to be capable of willed change and improvement, if markets were seen to be mechanisms which could be manipulated or freed, if human suffering might be remedied rather than endured, the beliefs of centuries were already shifting, and being shifted iteratively by 'facts' which changed attitudes and were then changed again as those new attitudes were recorded and came into play. We see in the political and moral world of the late eighteenth century, as in our own, a continuum of events which run from the apparently uncaused to the stupidly provoked. And surrounding, sustaining, and flowing through these events is a cascade of argument which ranges from an incoherent cry of pain right through to detailed prescriptions for the reordering of society and government. Between the conceptually discrete (but always interconnected) 'facts' and 'opinions' are institutions, claims, and clusters of behaviours which changed under pressure of events and then fed back fresh pressures. This is where crime, tax, tariffs, entrepreneurialism, literacy, riots, drains, lunatic asylums, military technology, newspapers, royal courts, and liberation movements all fit in.

So debates about old and new taxes, legal reform, and constitution-making did not arise from nowhere as a whim of the chattering classes. Leaving well enough alone was not a long-term option. Every government faced the spiralling demands of military expenditure, in a world where political communities without armies could be wiped off the face of the map. Those who stuck with old taxes found that their yield drifted slowly downwards. Those who sought to impose new ones tended to find that the rich and the powerful had sewn up politics in a way that prevented their wealth from being easily tapped. So some kind of political theory was articulated every time a tax was paid, demanded, or resisted, while standing still was no more possible than it is for a man on an escalator. If reform of some sort was unavoidable, if only in the sense that British universities were 'reformed' in the 1980s and 1990s (more has had to be done with less), then the Enlightenment regains one sort of legitimacy. If changes needed to be attempted, there is something to be said for listening to people who had already identified weaknesses, or evil, in the previous way of doing things. It is a matter of taste, not principle, whether system-makers are taken to be the best or the worst of the group.

Legacies of these late eighteenth-century debates still shape many of our own, and the very terms in which we conduct them. We have still not decided whether war is a necessary or contingent aspect of being human;³¹ we have not hit on a system of criminal justice which is swift, cheap, humane, and effective. We are contemptuous of intolerance, but have developed a new list of things we cannot tolerate. We like to limit

³⁰ See for instance Daniel Roche, *The people of Paris: an essay in popular culture in the eighteenth century* (1981; English trans., Leamington Spa, 1987), ch. 5, 'Learning to be consumers', and *A history of everyday things: the birth of consumption in France, 1600–1800* (1997; English trans., Cambridge, 2000). This book's chapter 5, on lighting and heating, includes a reflection on the meanings of light and enlightenment which usefully draws together both meanings of culture.

³¹ John Keegan's Reith lectures for 1998, *War and our world* (London, 1998), tackled this issue, not only giving due weight to eighteenth-century theory and practice in their historical sweep, but looking at evidence and argument in ways which would have been accessible to eighteenth-century commentators.

the powers of governments by grounding them on some form of popular assent, but we are wary of unmediated populism. But the writers of the Enlightenment left us more than the agenda for a course in civics. Arguably, this was the era when history, as we understand it, was born.

III

Gibbon and Robertson have both attracted sets of essays recently;³² Karen O'Brien has written on these historians, together with Hume, Voltaire, and Ramsay; Christopher Berry has embedded within his study of the social thought of the Scottish Enlightenment a long and detailed synthesis of histories written by Hume,³³ Robertson, Smith, Kames, Millar, Dunbar, Stuart, and Ferguson; while John Pocock has brought out the first two important volumes of what promises to be an extended exploration of Gibbon and the contexts in which he wrote and has been read.³⁴ What emerges from all these studies is apt to be broad agreement on what eighteenth-century historians were attempting. Pocock sums it up by declaring that although the writing of history in the second half of the eighteenth century was 'still in a pre-modern condition', the discrete activities which underpinned it (narrative, erudition, philosophy) were being combined and subsumed into an enlightened narrative. This recounted, and explained, the emergence of civil society, manners, and the state from the unsatisfactory muddle of Europe's post-Roman past.³⁵

We have learned to be sceptical about the claims of any group about the inadequacies of their predecessors, or about the originality of the techniques they use or the findings they propound. When Voltaire and Hume tell us that they will write different, better history, rejecting a narrative of kings and battles, this does not prove that they were in fact the first to construct accounts of social change.³⁶ Likewise, intentions may shift or waver over the years, and revisions in successive editions or access to an author's letters may reveal a complexity at odds with claims made in mature autobiographies.³⁷

Most commentators agree in seeing the historians of this era as self-conscious narrators, aware that history is a chosen story, a thing made rather than a thing

³² David Womersley, ed., with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock, 'Edward Gibbon: bicentenary essays', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355 (1997); Rosamund McKitterick and Roland Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire* (Cambridge, 1997); Brown, ed., *Robertson and the expansion of empire*; and Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*.

³³ O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*; Berry, *Social theories of the Scottish Enlightenment*. Amongst recent pieces on Hume is Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume* (London, 1989), and David Wootton, 'Hume, "the historian"', in David Fate Norton, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Hume* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 281-312. See also Knud Haakonssen, *Natural law and moral philosophy: from Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1996), where, according to John Robertson's review in *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 21 (1998), pp. 84-5, 'context' is given less than its due weight.

³⁴ Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*. We have come a long way from Martine Watson Brownley's contention that Gibbon was strong on detail and weak on meaning, in 'Gibbon's artistic and historical scope in the *Decline and Fall*', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 42 (1981), pp. 629-42.

³⁵ Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, II: *Narratives of civil government*, pp. 7 and 8-25.

³⁶ See, for instance, Peter Burke, 'Introduction', p. xii, to Peter Burke, ed., *A new kind of history from the writings of Febvre* (London, 1973).

³⁷ Disappointingly, the letters of William Robertson so far located prove much less rewarding than those of Hume or Gibbon: Jeffrey Smitten, 'Robertson's letters and the life of writing', in Brown, ed., *Robertson and the expansion of empire*.

discovered. Most see the meta-narrative as one of progress and improvement over time, even if that time-span has to be long enough to subsume past episodes of decline and fall. Most discern an attitude towards sources which is ‘modern’,³⁸ in that none of these writers relished being caught suppressing what they must have known, or in ignorance of what they were claiming to know. (John Matthews notes a contrast here between Gibbon and Voltaire: Gibbon describing ‘diligence and accuracy’ as ‘the only merits which a historical writer may ascribe to himself’, and Voltaire dismissing ‘[d]etails which lead to nothing’ as ‘impedimenta’.)³⁹ Most agree in finding within accounts of events long ago hints, or even analyses, which shed light on the author’s stance on contemporary issues: how well founded were the claims of the French parlements? Did the Act of Union mark the end of distinctively Scottish history? How could sturdy citizens prosper though commerce without risking the degeneracy which so often attends luxury? Was the Reformation an episode that was closed, tinged with the barbarism intrinsic to fanaticism a couple of centuries earlier, or did it remain a living culture, still shaping and being shaped by the beliefs and choices of contemporaries?

In agreeing that these historians are constructing narratives, we enter a debate where straw men are apt to be paraded: gender specialists still invoke pictures of men and women rotating in their separate spheres,⁴⁰ poverty is supposed to have taken a new depersonalized form with the advent of full-blown industrial capitalism.⁴¹ History itself, quite properly, is seen as an important literary form by people other than historians. Here, the charge often put is that those who write history naïvely suppose that they are assembling truth-tesserae, and that the mosaic they construct with them will be a picture of a truth which they would have been able to photograph had they only been present, and equipped, at the time.⁴² Lettrists know better, and like to explain the mistake to one another. Debates about the histories written in the eighteenth century necessarily reflect these perceptions, but expand into other areas. If enlightened history

³⁸ Hume’s discovery in the Scots College in Paris that Charles II’s pose of detachment towards religion masked a ‘zeal’ for Roman Catholicism forced him in revisions to the History after 1764 to sharpen and intensify his reading of Charles’s plans for ‘changing the religion and subverting the constitution of England’. O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, p. 68, quoting Hume, *The letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (2 vols., Oxford, 1932), no. 245, and *The history of England*, ed. William B. Todd (7 vols., Indianapolis, 1983), vi, pp. 308, 448, 286. O’Brien points to Graeme Paul Slater, ‘Authorship and authority in Hume’s History of England (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1990) for full treatment of Hume’s revisions. See also Philip S. Hicks, *Neo-classical history and English culture: from Clarendon to Hume* (New York, 1996).

³⁹ Gibbon, *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (7 vols., London, 1897–1901), i, p. ix, quoted in John Matthews, ‘Gibbon and the later Roman Empire: causes and circumstances’, in McKitterick and Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire*, p. 20. This illustrates the argument advanced by Pocock, especially in *Barbarism and religion*, 1: *The Enlightenment of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764*, Part II, ‘The encounter with Paris and the defence of erudition’, pp. 137–258.

⁴⁰ See for instance the historiographical review by Amanda Vickery, ‘Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women’s history’, *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 383–414.

⁴¹ Robert Jütte, *Poverty and deviance in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1994), explores the state of play in the period 1450–1800.

⁴² The historians of the Enlightenment made no such error, see O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, pp. 5–12.

aspired to disinterest, to cosmopolitanism, to accessibility, how did its writers decide what subjects to address? How did they attempt to make their work ‘scientific’? How did they suppose their public would be affected by what they read or heard?⁴³ All these issues may be explored both in the writings of the historians themselves and in those of today’s critics and scholars, where judgements of ‘success’ are made or withheld.

Unanimity is not to be expected, nor is it found. One area of disagreement amongst eighteenth-century historians is that of progress: is it to be found in all societies? If ‘stages’ can be discerned in actual or imagined development, does every society have to go through each of them? How do we account for backward or primitive societies which still exist? (If the Goths were transformed by being proffered the Bible in their own tongue, why had the Red Indians’ culture resisted the effect?) Is it always true that the customs of the uncivilized are barbarous, or do we risk failing to discern a utility and seamliness in certain modes of behaviour because we examine them through Eurocentric spectacles? If the uncivilized are our own recent forebears (as the Scots had to concede of the feuding clansmen of the Highlands) what political point is at stake if we seek to distance ourselves from them?⁴⁴ Another area of contention grows out of this one: a crass reading of Adam Smith supposes that he was so taken with the achievements of commercial society that he either failed to notice, or failed to take seriously, the damage it inflicts on individuals and groups. Smith and his fellow-Scots were, of course, well aware that ordering society around contract and profit undermined both courage and neighbourliness; while the de-skilled worker who faced drudgery without complexity or responsibility would (unless saved by education) risk tumbling into ignoble torpor.⁴⁵ They clung, none the less, to the view that there was no way back, and have thus laid themselves open to the charge of being running dogs of nascent capitalism. This is a primary-coloured version of a question which opens still more: how far, and how consciously, were these historians, or enlightened writers in general, propagandists for a class or an interest group? The identification of ‘the Enlightenment’, or a sub-set like ‘the Physiocrats’, with the interests of the bourgeoisie, or market forces, is now seldom proposed without heavy qualification. The claim is best examined through work now over twenty years old.⁴⁶

Three other lenses are worth looking through while examining the special features of

⁴³ Rosamund McKitterick, in ‘Edward Gibbon and the early middle ages in eighteenth-century Europe’, demonstrates that Handel’s opera *Ottone* drew on the importance of a recently discovered marriage charter of 972, while other libretti celebrated early medieval heroes as well as Romans and emperors. McKitterick and Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire*, pp. 174–89.

⁴⁴ O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, p. 10; Nicholas Phillipson, ‘Providence and progress: an introduction to the historical thought of William Robertson’, Bruce P. Lenman, ‘“From savage to Scot” via the French and the Spaniards: Principal Robertson’s Spanish sources’, and Geoffrey Carnall, ‘Robertson and contemporary images of India’, all in Brown, ed., *Robertson and the expansion of empire*; Berry, *Social theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, pp. 61–73, 91–119.

⁴⁵ See Donald Winch, *Riches and poverty: an intellectual history of political economy in Britain* (Cambridge, 1996); I. Hont and M. Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and virtue: the shaping of political economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983), and Lisa Hill, ‘Adam Ferguson: the paradox of progress and decline’, *History of Political Thought*, 18 (1997), pp. 677–706.

⁴⁶ See Robert Anchor, *The Enlightenment tradition* (Berkeley, 1967), which has a splendidly guarded preface by Hayden White, emphasizing that this is the author’s account, and no more; Ronald Meek, *The economics of physiocracy* (Cambridge, MA, 1963); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the absolutist state* (London, 1974), ch. 2, ‘Class and state: problems of periodization’; H. Mizuta, ‘Towards a definition of the Scottish Enlightenment’, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 154 (1976), pp. 1459–64.

enlightened history-writing. They are the imperial theme, the Christian claim, and the interplay of author and audience.

Today it is still not clear when or why the Roman Empire ‘fell’.⁴⁷ The topic continues to intrigue us, but few Britons now feel an active engagement with its many implications. Their late eighteenth-century counterparts had pressing reasons to try to understand what it meant for an empire to expand, to face resistance at the periphery, or to succumb to decadence at home.⁴⁸ Growing out of this, the theme of universal monarchy, or attempts to dominate Europe through a single dynasty, intrigued and preoccupied Giannone, Robertson, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Gibbon, and Hume. Charles V and Louis XIV personified the threat (and it was clearly seen to be a threat); a modern successor to them might be judged impossible, but a maritime empire might prove a vehicle for checking and overseeing a European balance of power.⁴⁹ The common European good has, it appears, been advanced by competition between separate states, something which at first sight appears wasteful. The rival advantages of empires and discrete states were addressed by Montesquieu;⁵⁰ and summaries of some recent thinking can be found in surveys dealing with *very* long-term history.⁵¹ Analysing and perhaps extolling a national culture represents a significant strand in, for instance, the writings of Voltaire (Sweden and Russia as well as France); Hume (England, but largely subsuming Scotland, Ireland, and Wales); Robertson (Scotland, especially); Giannone (Naples); Ramsay (America): how did they reconcile this task with the supranational claims of a common culture, something which can, after all, be read as a pacific, but still imperial, theme?⁵² One answer, which sounds trivial but is not, is that they used their style, a mode of writing which set a distance between the passionate engagement of the protagonists and the cool eye of the impartial spectator.⁵³ Another

⁴⁷ Simon Loseby ‘The fall of the western Roman empire: current interpretations’ (unpublished paper given to the graduate seminar of the History Department of the University of Sheffield).

⁴⁸ See Jeremy Black, ‘Gibbon and international relations’, in McKitterick and Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire*, and Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London, 1992), especially chs. 2 and 3, ‘profits’ and ‘peripheries’. Historians of, and within, the last surviving superpower remain fascinated, as in Paul Kennedy’s *The rise and fall of the great powers: economic change and military conflict, 1500–2000* (London, 1988), whose history has proved sounder than its prophecy.

⁴⁹ John Robertson ends his essay ‘Gibbon’s Roman Empire as a universal monarchy: the *Decline and Fall* and the imperial idea in early modern Europe’, in McKitterick and Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire*, by musing darkly on the impending threat of Napoleon. It is not entirely fair to ask historians to be prophets, but Gibbon is credited with having ‘lived long enough to begin to suspect’ that Europe could again be threatened by a hungry superpower. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁵⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, 1989), especially Part 2, Books 9 and 10, ‘On the laws in their relation with defensive force’ and ‘On the laws in their relation with offensive force’.

⁵¹ The phrase, much used by E. L. Jones, is credited by him to R. M. Hartwell, in ‘Economic growth in England before the industrial revolution: some methodological issues’, *Journal of Economic History*, 29 (1969), pp. 13–31; see Jones’s ch. 7 ‘Nation-states’ in his *The European miracle* (Cambridge, 1981) and John Hall, *Powers and liberties: the causes and consequences of the rise of the west* (Harmondsworth, 1986), pp. 133–44.

⁵² See J. G. A. Pocock’s review of Karen O’Brien’s *Narratives of Enlightenment*, in *History of Political Thought*, 19 (1998), pp. 310–12, in which he calls in question her use of the term ‘cosmopolitan’, promising a different view in what was then his forthcoming study: Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*.

⁵³ Karen O’Brien offers a careful exploration of Robertson’s tear-stained Mary, Queen of Scots: sentiment abounds and we, as spectators, are drawn to share the sentiments of those who watched

is the attempt to examine domestic events and institutions in the light of the known and potential other: here we note Hume's refusal to countenance the Lockean claim that absolute monarchy was a deviant, illegitimate form of government. Perhaps most important was their habit of constructing a hierarchy of explanations, where the local and immediate could be seen as an example of a more general account. Plainly, 'civilizing' in its many meanings dominated these histories, but writers were also handling such themes as ways of raising and using armies; when and why taxes led to rebellion; and how religious beliefs sustained or threatened political stability. Thus, for instance, Hume comments on Mary's folly in attempting to stem the rise of Protestantism in England: 'whatever may be said in favour of suppressing by persecution, the first beginnings of heresy, no solid argument can be alleged for extending severity towards multitudes, or endeavouring, by capital punishments, to extirpate an opinion which has diffused itself among men of every rank and station'.⁵⁴ Here the wickedness of attempting to reimpose Roman Catholicism by force is neither emphasized nor denied, but the ineffectiveness of such a policy, when pursued *at a particular stage* in the progress of the Reformation is presented as a local instance of a general rule.

It is obvious that the values of enlightened history were at odds with those of even competent persecutors. Robertson and the other Scots who held on to their Christian connections had to pick their way carefully past superstition and enthusiasm, while grafting moderatism and a respect for a natural order on to a religion which, they supposed, had somehow emerged into their era cleansed of uncivilized stains.⁵⁵ Voltaire, Gibbon, and Hume, notoriously, found much to mock in the beliefs and practices of the church in various stages of its development. None the less, each of them can be shown to have found something to honour – if only an unintended by-product – and to have resented, with varying degrees of publicity and sincerity, the charge of irreligion.⁵⁶ David Womersley has shown how in 1779 Gibbon portrayed himself as the courageous challenger of the old-fashioned and orthodox, but in draft 'E' of the *Memoirs* of 1791 he preferred to seem baffled by unforeseeable outrage.⁵⁷ The continuing importance of

the execution at Fotheringay. The intention, however, she tells us, is to sustain a settled, Hanoverian Scotland, and to close and marginalize this Jacobite alternative. ('Robertson and eighteenth-century narrative history', in Brown, ed., *Robertson and the expansion of empire*, pp. 85–7.)

⁵⁴ Hume, *The history of England*, ed. Todd, III, p. 432.

⁵⁵ Phillipson, 'Providence and progress', in Brown, ed., *Robertson and the expansion of empire*, pp. 68–73.

⁵⁶ Bernard Gagnebin, 'La diffusion clandestine des oeuvres de Voltaire par les soins des frères Cramer', *Annales de l'Université de Lyon* (1965), 3e série, fasc. 39, p. 123; Andrew Brown and Ulla Kölving, 'Voltaire and Cramer?', in Christiane Mervaud and Sylvain Menant, eds., *Le siècle de Voltaire hommage à René Pomeau* (2 vols., Oxford, 1987), I, pp. 149–83.

⁵⁷ Womersley, 'Gibbon and the "watchmen of the holy city"', in McKitterick and Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire*, pp. 196–8. Gibbon's overt disdain for such critics led him to make revisions which conceded some points of detail or style, where his case was weakest, and when he was most alarmed, but in the third edition he sharpened his position more often than not. *Ibid.*, pp. 198–216. See also Nigel Aston, 'A "disorderly squadron"? A fresh look at clerical responses to *The decline and fall*', and Womersley's examination of Gibbon's reaction to the irreligion of the French revolutionaries, in 'Gibbon's *Memoirs*: autobiography in time of revolution', especially pp. 352–5, both in Womersley (et al.) ed., 'Edward Gibbon: bicentenary essays'. Womersley points out (in 'Watchmen', p. 196) that Gibbon seems to have accepted the constraint of revising his text in such a way as not to disrupt the pagination of the previous edition: pleasingly, similar

established religion in ancien régime England is agreed, although what that importance amounts to is not:⁵⁸ we can hardly wonder that contemporaries likewise reacted inconsistently to the claims of churchmen across Europe. It was by no means straightforward to disentangle public culture from attitudes and ceremonies which even atheists recognized as a valuable form of social cement.⁵⁹ Historians had particular reason to take history's legacies seriously, even if not all of them survived to ponder the impact of dechristianization upon France.

Veiling their secular, if not always irreligious, presuppositions before certain audiences was for these writers only one manifestation of their reactions to readers' responses, and their sense of cultural tides to flow with. Hume's Stuart volumes, Karen O'Brien argues, acquired the cosmopolitanism, or at least 'Europocentricity' which Duncan Forbes pointed out, only through revisions made chiefly in 1759.⁶⁰ She judges that Voltaire allowed each successive revision of the *Essai sur les mœurs* to get racier: 'the satirist steadily gets the better of the historian'. We need to notice that it was the earliest, calmest version, which gave most credit to the civilizing role of the medieval church, that Hume, Gibbon, and Robertson read and internalized.⁶¹ Vico's second edition of *Scienza nuova*, Stone explains, represented both a piece of cautious footwork in response to readings of the English deists, and an attempt to shift cultural history to the foreground of any explanation of human development.⁶² William Robertson strove to appear detached and objective, refusing to engage in controversy with those who challenged his readings of events, but persisted with revisions based on further manuscript discoveries, making use of high-level diplomatic contacts to furnish material on the Spanish in South America.⁶³ Here he had to move cautiously: his anti-popery fitted well with the sweep of the story he had to tell, but ordinary good manners made it awkward to involve in his researches anyone who could be offended by the material's being used to present Spain in a hostile light. In the event, the Spanish authorities decided not to risk allowing the translation of the *History of America* into Spain, the Philippines, or Spanish America.⁶⁴ Sometimes, of course, censorship promoted sales just as much as it prevented them, and eighteenth-century historians undoubtedly sought and gained wide sales and

footwork can be observed in the second edition of E. C. Mossner's *Life of David Hume* (Oxford, 1980), for instance on pp. 95–6.

⁵⁸ See J. C. D. Clark, *English society, 1688–1832: ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien régime* (Cambridge, 1985); idem, *Revolution and rebellion: state and society in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Cambridge, 1986); Peter Harrison, 'Religion' and the religions in the *English Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1990); Knud Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and religion: rational dissent in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 1996); and, for instance, four short papers (by Clark, W. A. Speck, Roy Porter, and Jeremy Black) addressing '1688 and all that', in *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15 (1992), pp. 131–49.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, James van Horn Melton, *Absolutism and the eighteenth-century origins of compulsory schooling in Prussia and Austria* (Cambridge, 1988). Frederick the Great was a conspicuous proponent of the 'double truth' position: only elites could be permitted to be atheist.

⁶⁰ Duncan Forbes, 'Introduction', to David Hume, *The history of Great Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 23; O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, pp. 56–69.

⁶¹ O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, pp. 52, 48.

⁶² Stone, *Vico's cultural history*, pp. 280–3.

⁶³ Smitten 'Robertson's letters and the life of writing', in Brown, ed., *Robertson and the expansion of empire*, pp. 42–50.

⁶⁴ John Renwick, 'Robertson's reception in eighteenth-century France', in Brown, ed., *Robertson and the expansion of empire*, n. 39, p. 155.

wider readership. Several of them made a living, an independent and dignified living, from writing history. Here we, and they, must recognize an important, and measurable, 'success'. What is in contention is the extent to which they achieved what they were beginning to claim: 'philosophical' and 'scientific' objectivity.

It is no accident that the claims of the Enlightenment, and of history, both encounter the challenge of relativism.⁶⁵ There is nowhere to stand that is not part of the picture; all knowledge is perceived and understood subjectively. But when Hume's Cleanthes suggested Philo test his scepticism to destruction by leaving through the window rather than the door, he offered a test which we still use. Physics, engineering, and medicine may all be closed shops, a freemasonry of the privileged who share a common culture: as children of the Enlightenment, however, uncertain about the possibility of miracles, we not only feel but *think* that we are safer in the hands of the surgeon, or pilot, or bomb disposal team trained by people who try to conform to an objective reality. Bad history may not threaten us as obviously as bad science or technology, but – however complicated the meanings of 'is it true?' – we rank ourselves with the writers of the Enlightenment by persisting in asking 'might this or that be shown *not* to be true?'. It is their question, and it is the one which sustains our culture.

⁶⁵ See the useful sections in Berry, *Social theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 'Relativism' within ch. 4, 'Social diversity', which examines how the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment tackled the problem, and ch. 8 'Reading the Scottish Enlightenment', where current interpretations are outlined and assessed.