



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Moral culture and historical progress in the Scottish enlightenment

**Citation for published version:**

Brown, S 2019, 'Moral culture and historical progress in the Scottish enlightenment', *Modern Intellectual History*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 993-1005. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244317000646>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1017/S1479244317000646](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244317000646)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Modern Intellectual History

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This article will be published in a revised form in *Modern Intellectual History*, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244317000646>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works. © Stephen Brown

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## Moral Culture and Historical Progress in the Scottish Enlightenment

Stewart J. Brown

School of Divinity

University of Edinburgh

E-mail: s.j.brown@ed.ac.uk

Thomas Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment 1690-1805*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. viii & 216 pp. Lewis Walpole Series in Eighteenth-Century Culture and History.

Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. viii & 246 pp. Ideas in Context series.

We continue to be intrigued by the Scottish Enlightenment. How was it that a relatively remote country on the geographical periphery of Europe – with a harsh climate, a largely mountainous terrain, a strict Calvinist creed, a small population and a history of civil strife – emerged in the 1740s as a ‘hotbed of genius’ and a centre of the European Enlightenment? The subject, to be sure, has been well studied. There is an immense literature and it can seem that there is little new to be said. Indeed, it may be, as the eminent historian, Colin Kidd, has observed in this journal, that ‘the very concept of the “Scottish Enlightenment” has become a stale historiographical commonplace’.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the subject continues to intrigue, continues to attract scholars from a variety of disciplines. For something extraordinary happened in eighteenth-century Scotland. Simply to list some of the names cannot fail to impress: David Hume in philosophy and historical writing, Frances Hutcheson in moral philosophy, Adam Smith in moral philosophy and economic thought, Adam Ferguson in social thought, Thomas Reid in philosophy, William Robertson in historical writing, Hugh Blair in rhetoric and

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Kidd, ‘The Phillipsonian Enlightenment’, *Modern Intellectual History* 11 (2014), p. 181.

literary studies, James Hutton in geology, and Joseph Black in chemistry. The achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment were immense; its world influence has been enduring. And at its heart was the study of moral philosophy and of the moral progress of humankind.

The serious study of the Scottish Enlightenment began in the 1960s, about the same time as the renaissance of academic interest in Scottish history more generally. About the same time, Scotland's Enlightenment also attracted considerable scholarly interest from across the Atlantic, including a recognition of the influence of Scottish moral philosophy, economic thought and historical approaches on the founding fathers of the North American republic. Over the past half century, the scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment has steadily grown, with studies of its social, economic and political context, of its institutional foundations, of its social networks, of its leading thinkers, its relations with the Churches, its ecological interests, and its interactions with the thought of the Continent and North America.<sup>2</sup>

The two works under review here offer fresh insights and new interpretations of Scotland's Enlightenment. Both works are studies in the history of ideas, exploring the thought of seminal figures in Scotland's Enlightenment within their cultural context, and both focus primarily on social ethics. Thomas Ahnert explores the moral culture of the Scottish Enlightenment, arguing that it was far more influenced by the theological language and conceptions of Scottish Presbyterianism than has been previously recognised. Anna Plassart considers how thinkers of the later Scottish Enlightenment, imbued with visions of historical progress, through expanding commerce, towards increasing politeness and sociability,

---

<sup>2</sup> The literature on the Scottish Enlightenment is immense, but see especially Alexander Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2001); Alexander Broadie (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2003); John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005); David Allan, *Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1993); Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1985);

responded to the violence unleashed by the French Revolution and especially the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

\*\*\*

In his eloquent essays on the Enlightenment, published in 1932 under the title of *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, the American historian, Carl Becker, referred to an eighteenth-century secularisation of social morality. The eighteenth-century philosophers, in his memorable phrase, ‘demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine only to rebuild it with more up-to-date materials’.<sup>3</sup> For many scholars, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers shared in this building project. The Scottish Enlightenment, it was held, moved the foundations of morality away from the essentially Augustinian theology of the Reformed Westminster Confession of Faith, with its teachings of original sin, total depravity of human nature, predestination, and salvation by grace alone. Instead, the Scottish moralists, including Frances Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid, looked for the foundations of morality in human nature, whether in the form of a moral sense, or of learned behaviour.<sup>4</sup> The Scots approached human nature experimentally, in what David Hume famously described as a ‘science of man’. ‘The Scottish Enlightenment’, insisted the sociologist, Charles Camic, ‘displaced the dependency and particularism that were at the root of Scottish Calvinist culture with the distinctively modern attitudes of independence and universalism’.<sup>5</sup> ‘One of the hallmarks of the Enlightenment’, Christopher Berry has observed, ‘was to challenge the link [between religion and morality]’. ‘The Scottish

---

<sup>3</sup> Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, CT, 1932), p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Schneider (ed.), *The Scottish Moralists on Human Nature and Society* (Chicago, 1967); Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, 1945). Significantly, both these works give virtually no attention to religious thought.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Camic, *Experience and Enlightenment: Socialization for Cultural Change in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Chicago, 1983), p. 45.

Enlightenment’, he added, ‘was not exempt, even though ... it was not as controversial as in France’.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment*, the respected intellectual historian of the Enlightenment, Thomas Ahnert of the University of Edinburgh, offers an alternative interpretation of eighteenth-century Scottish moral culture, one which highlights the continuing intellectual influence of Scotland’s Presbyterian tradition and re-examines the prevalence of a largely secular ‘science of man’ in mid to late eighteenth-century Scotland. In this, he shares the approach of a number of scholars – among them Richard Sher, M. A. Stewart, Alexander Broadie, Nicholas Phillipson, and James Harris – who have given serious attention to the influence of Christianity in the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> Ahnert’s previous work explored the intellectual history of early modern Europe, especially Britain and the German-speaking regions. This included his first book, *Religion and the Origins of the German Enlightenment: Faith and the Reform of Learning in the Thought of Christian Thomasius*, published in 2006.<sup>8</sup> For Ahnert, religious belief was of vital importance in the thought of the European Enlightenment, and his new study, the *Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment*, highlights this importance. The moral culture of Enlightenment Scotland, he maintains, was constructed not so much from Carl Becker’s ‘up-to-date materials’, as from the older theological language of Scotland’s Reformed, or Calvinist, tradition.

Ahnert begins his account with the re-establishment of Presbyterianism in the Church of Scotland following the Revolution of 1688-89. As he observes, Reformed theology

---

<sup>6</sup> Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> Sher, *Church and University*; M. A. Stewart, ‘Religion and Rational Theology’, in Broadie (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, pp. 31-59; Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, chap. 5: ‘Enlightened Religion’; Nicholas Phillipson, ‘Providence and Progress: An Introduction to the Historical Thought of William Robertson’ in Stewart J. Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 74-91; James A. Harris, ‘Answering Bayle’s Question: Religious Belief in the Moral Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment’, *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 1 (2003), pp. 229-54; James A. Harris, ‘Religion in Hutcheson’s Moral Philosophy’, *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008), pp. 205-22.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Ahnert, *Religion and the Origins of the German Enlightenment: Faith and the Reform of Learning in the Thought of Christian Thomasius* (Rochester, NY, 2006).

exercised a profound influence within Scottish culture, including elite culture, throughout the long eighteenth century. The Westminster Confession was adopted as the standard of faith in the Church of Scotland in 1690. Most leading thinkers of Enlightenment Scotland were professors at one of Scotland's universities, or ministers in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, or had trained for the ministry of the Church of Scotland. As Scottish professors or ministers, they were required to subscribe to the Westminster Confession, and promise to teach or preach in accordance with its doctrines. They could be dismissed for not doing so. For Ahnert, religious developments in eighteenth-century Presbyterian Scotland mirrored religious developments elsewhere in Europe at this time, with a changing emphasis from right doctrine to right conduct. In Scotland, this meant a movement away from a rigid adherence to the Reformed doctrines of the Westminster Confession to an emphasis on charity, virtue and sociability. However, he maintains, this changing emphasis also took place within the framework of Scottish Reformed theology, and the movement away from a dogmatic Calvinism was more gradual, and less pronounced, than most previous scholars have recognised.

Ahnert organises his account of Scotland's changing moral culture around three main groups – heterodox Presbyterians, Moderate Presbyterians, and Orthodox Presbyterians. The first of these groups, the heterodox Presbyterians, emerged in the early eighteenth century, in part as a response to the intense, often violent, religious controversies of the seventeenth century. Heterodox Presbyterians included John Simson, professor of divinity at the University of Glasgow from 1708 to his death in 1740 (though suspended from teaching for unsound doctrine by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1729). They also included Simson's student, the Irish Presbyterian, Frances Hutcheson, who served as professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow from 1729 to his death in 1746. The heterodox Presbyterians endorsed a Christianity that emphasised moral conduct. They

insisted that each person possessed an innate moral sense, which showed them how to behave in an ethical manner in society. They sought to navigate a middle way between the extremes of a rigid doctrinal orthodoxy, with demands of unquestioned obedience to divine law, and a religious enthusiasm, with claims of direct inspiration of individuals by the holy spirit.

They did not reject what they viewed as the fundamentals of Christianity, as conveyed through Scripture and the creedal statements of the Church. For Hutcheson, Christian teachings provided the 'truest Idea of Virtue' (p. 53), and supplemented the moral insights that each person received from their inner moral sense. Further, because they understood that human emotions and affections had a greater power to influence behaviour than did intellect, and that reason was all too often the slave to the passions, heterodox Presbyterians also held that the threat of punishment in an afterlife was a vital 'temporary support' to encourage habits of virtue (p. 60). This is not to say that they did not believe in an afterlife; on the contrary, they viewed an afterlife as necessary to redress the obvious injustices of this world. But they also believed that the threat of punishment in an afterlife was a powerful inducement for individuals to cultivate habits of virtue through a 'culture of the mind' (p. 68). Individuals might initially act in a moral manner in the hope of attaining eternal reward or avoiding eternal punishment, but in time their moral behaviour would become habitual, and form part of their character. Through a process of gradual, incremental moral improvement, individuals would develop the 'constant, virtuous character' that would enable them to achieve independence and contribute to the moral improvement of their society. For their critics, the heterodox Presbyterians' emphasis on moral behaviour promoted a righteousness based on good works, which was all too similar to Roman Catholic teachings. But for others, the heterodox Presbyterians offered a moral philosophy that was broadly Christian and that fit the emerging culture of improvement in early eighteenth-century Scotland.

Ahnert's second group, the Moderate Presbyterians, emerged as a coherent party or movement within the Church of Scotland in the early 1750s. They came to prominence through their insistence that the Church courts of the national Church must enforce the civil law permitting the exercise of lay patronage in the appointment of parish ministers. The patronage law, which had been enacted for Scotland by the British parliament in 1712, was deeply unpopular in Scotland, where parish communities believed that their own leaders – the heritors (local landowners) and elders in the church – should elect their parish ministers, as had been the practice in Scotland for much of the period since the Reformation. But Moderates insisted that an established Church must enforce the civil law of patronage, and that presbyteries that would not ordain patron's candidates as parish ministers in accordance with the civil law must be punished. Moderates advocated a close alliance of Church, state and the landed classes in Scotland, and they promoted the wider culture of improvement. With the support of Scotland's governing orders, Moderates from the 1760s gained an ascendancy within the General Assembly, or supreme ecclesiastical court of the established Church of Scotland. Leading Moderates included William Robertson, an Edinburgh parish minister and principal of the University of Edinburgh; Hugh Blair, an Edinburgh parish minister and professor of rhetoric and belles lettres at the University of Edinburgh; and George Campbell, an Aberdeen parish minister and professor of divinity at Marischal College. Most of the luminaries of the Scottish Enlightenment were aligned more or less with the Moderate party. Even the notorious sceptic, David Hume, enjoyed personal friendships with leading Moderates, and in 1755 the Moderates had thwarted a motion in the General Assembly, or highest ecclesiastical court of Scotland, to censure Hume.

As Ahnert demonstrates, the Moderates shared many of the ideas and approaches of the heterodox Presbyterians. Moderates believed that Christian revelation was a necessary supplement to the natural virtue revealed through the innate moral sense, and that Christianity



formed the truest form of virtue (p. 82). They also believed that a constant, virtuous character was the product of habit, to be developed through a gradual, incremental process (p. 85). The Moderates exercised leadership and authority within the established order of Church and state in Scotland; they were men of position who took their responsibilities seriously. While they downplayed such harsh teachings of the Westminster Confession as double predestination and the total depravity of human nature, they recognised that a Church required a creed and they preserved the Confession as the standard of faith in Scotland's national Church. They accepted that people living in non-Christian countries who had never heard the gospel could be saved, although they doubted that much real virtue would be found in non-Christian societies and they were sceptical about the possibility of a natural religion supporting a sound morality without the support of Christian revelation (pp. 86, 101). Ahnert is critical of the argument of such scholars as R. B. Sher that the Moderates embraced a 'Christian stoicism', with an ethic rooted in ancient Greece and Rome – again because he holds that Moderate Presbyterians did not believe that pagan societies could approach a Christian standard of morality. For Moderates, Ahnert observes, 'Stoicism was the most noble system of philosophy that natural, unassisted reason was capable of, but it was not equal to Christianity, or suitable for supplementing it' (p. 102).

The final group considered by Ahnert were the Orthodox Presbyterians, who represented probably the majority within the Church of Scotland. Leading Orthodox Presbyterians included the Edinburgh parish minister, John Erskine, the Edinburgh parish minister, Robert Walker, and the Paisley minister, John Witherspoon, who in 1768 crossed the Atlantic to assume the presidency of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton University. The Orthodox were firmly committed to right doctrine, which they believed found its purest expression in the Westminster Confession; they refused to follow what they viewed as the century's sentimental drift from right doctrine to right conduct. They opposed

what they perceived as the loose doctrine and the worldly attitudes of the Moderates, and they deeply resented the status and influence which Moderate Presbyterians enjoyed through their connections with Scotland's governing elite. The Orthodox firmly held to the Confession's teachings on the total depravity of human nature and salvation by divine grace alone. At the same time, they insisted on the power of human reason, unaided by divine revelation, to recognise certain moral truths. For otherwise, God would be unjust to condemn the heathens for their sins. Indeed, as Ahnert observes, Orthodox Presbyterians could place more reliance on reason and 'natural religion' than their Moderate counterparts. In this, the Orthodox followed the Westminster Confession, which in its first sentence asserted that 'the light of nature' revealed 'the goodness, wisdom, and power of God' to humankind. Moral principles, the Orthodox Presbyterian John Witherspoon insisted, were 'truths of reason' which all individuals could know through their intellects (p. 114).

Ahnert closes his account of Scotland's moral culture with the Leslie affair of 1805. In that year, the Moderates attempted to place one of their own, an Edinburgh parish minister, in the vacant chair of mathematics at the University of Edinburgh. The Orthodox supported the appointment of a gifted natural philosopher, John Leslie, who was not an Orthodox Presbyterian and who had even expressed support for Hume's views on causation. After a hard-fought struggle, Leslie was appointed, in a clear victory of ability over influence. Some have viewed the affair as marking both a reorientation of the Orthodox position on natural philosophy and the effective end of the Moderate ascendancy in the Scottish Church and universities.<sup>9</sup> Ahnert rejects both interpretations, reminding his readers that the Orthodox had always been open to natural philosophy and noting that the Moderate Presbyterians continued

---

<sup>9</sup> W. L. Mathieson, *Church and Reform in Scotland: A History from 1797 to 1843* (Glasgow, 1916), pp. 90-100; I. D. L. Clark, 'The Leslie Controversy, 1805', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 14 (1962), pp. 179-97; I. D. L. Clark, 'From Protest to Reaction: The Moderate Regime in the Church of Scotland, 1752-1805', in N. T. Phillipson and R. Mitchison (eds.), *Scotland in the Age of Improvement*, new edn. (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 201,222; J. B. Morrell, 'The Leslie Affair: Careers, Kirk and Politics in Edinburgh in 1805', *Scottish Historical Review* 54 (1975), pp. 63-82; Sher, *Church and University*, p. 321.

to exercise a significant influence over Scottish cultural life into the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Ahnert has developed a convincing argument that the moral culture of the Scottish Enlightenment continued to be shaped by Christian, especially Reformed, theology, as well as by natural philosophy or a science of man. He has argued effectively for the importance of the Presbyterian ideal of the disciplined life and the cultivation of constant virtue. The book is especially strong in its analysis of the moral thought of the heterodox and the Moderate Presbyterians. His arguments are less well developed regarding the Orthodox Presbyterians, who would have counted among their number the large majority of the Church of Scotland ministers. Here Ahnert's account would have benefited from more attention to the Orthodox commitment to the teachings of the Westminster Confession, including double predestination, the total depravity of human nature, God's wrath towards sin, and the doctrine that good works done by the non-elect are sinful and displeasing to God. The teachings of the Westminster Confession, and especially the doctrine of total depravity, were more fundamentally opposed to the moral culture of Enlightenment Scotland than Ahnert suggests, and this needed more attention. Ahnert draws most of his evidence on the Orthodox Presbyterian attitudes from the writings of John Witherspoon, and especially his writings after he had emigrated from Scotland. More attention might have been given to the writings of John Erskine, the acknowledged leader of the Orthodox party, who was more thirled than Witherspoon to the Westminster standards.

\*\*\*

In *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution*, Anna Plassart explores how a number of Scottish thinkers, influenced by the salient ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment, endeavoured to interpret the meaning of the French Revolution and especially the

revolutionary and Napoleonic warfare. A former Junior Research Fellow in Modern History at Christ Church, Oxford, and now a Lecturer in History at the Open University, Plassart argues that the Scottish intellectual responses to the revolutionary upheavals were important in shaping nineteenth-century British political thought. Her concern is with intellectual responses to the Revolution, rather than with such themes as the political and social unrest in Scotland, the ‘Friends of the People’, the state trials of prominent agitators, fears of French invasion, the militia riots, or the responses of the Churches – themes explored in an admirable book of 1912 by Henry W. Meikle, and more recently in works by John Brims, Emma Vincent Macleod, Colin Kidd, and Bob Harris, and in a collection of essays edited by Bob Harris.<sup>10</sup> Plassart’s analysis covers the period from 1790 to 1815, the ‘silver age’ for the Enlightenment in Scotland, when its greatest thinkers had passed or were passing from the scene. But this silver age would also see the rise of a talented group of Whig reformers, associated with the *Edinburgh Review*, established in 1802. Educated in the Scottish universities under the influence of the Enlightenment, especially the moral philosophy of the Enlightenment, these Whig reformers endeavoured to adapt Scottish philosophy to the emerging ethos of democratic nationalism.

Plassart has organised her book into three parts. In the first part, she considers the initial Scottish intellectual responses to the French Revolution, arguing that they differed markedly from English responses. In particular, she insists, the Scots were not influenced to the same extent as the English by the debate between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine; neither Burke’s appeals to chivalry and tradition nor Paine’s appeals to natural rights and

---

<sup>10</sup> Henry W. Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1912); John Brims, ‘The Scottish Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1989); Emma Vincent [Macleod], ‘The Responses of Scottish Churchmen to the French Revolution, 1789-1802’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 73 (1994), pp. 191-215; Colin Kidd, ‘The Kirk, the French Revolution, and the Burden of Scottish Whiggery’, in N. Aston (ed.), *Religious Change in Europe, 1650-1914* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 213-34; Bob Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (London, 2008); Bob Harris, ed., *Scotland in the Age of the French Revolution* (Edinburgh, 2005).

democracy struck chords for most Scots in 1789-90. Rather, Scottish responses to events in France were shaped largely by the Scottish Enlightenment's distinctive historical conceptions, especially as these conceptions were expressed in the historical writings of David Hume and Adam Smith. These writings, she maintains, placed emphasis on progress in history, including progress in social *moeurs*, that is, in manners and morals. For Plassart, Hume and Smith described history as 'the progress of morals towards a commercial sociability characterised by politeness and civilisation' (p. 40). They viewed this progress as continuous, despite occasional setbacks resulting from trade wars and commercial competition (the 'jealousy of trade'). The historical writings of Hume and Smith portrayed steadily expanding world networks of trade, growing understanding and mutual respect among trading nations, polite exchanges, cosmopolitan values, efforts to maintain a balance of power among European states, and informal conventions among states which restricted the violence of warfare.

In Part II, Plassart considers Scottish intellectual responses during the 1790s to the French Revolution and revolutionary warfare. Most Scottish commentators, she maintains, understood that the Revolution represented a 'momentous' shift in human affairs, 'which needed to be examined in the perspective of the Scottish science of man and politics' and of 'their narratives of moral, societal and historical progress' (p. 43). She considers a range of the early Scottish intellectual responses, including commentaries, public or private, by Thomas Reid, Adam Smith, William Robertson, Dugald Stewart and James Mackintosh. These early commentators, she observes, 'all agreed that the gradual establishment of civil liberties was the most distinctive achievement of a modern society characterised by increased exchanges and politeness' (p. 67). Where they differed was in the extent to which they believed that events in France were contributing to, or retarding, these progressive

movements. While most Scottish commentators were relatively favourable to the early phases of the Revolution, attitudes grew increasingly critical after the summer of 1792.

Plassart focuses on two individual responses during the 1790s. The first was that of the Scottish philosopher and historian, John Millar (1735-1801), Regius professor of civil law at the University of Glasgow from 1761. A Foxite Whig, Millar applauded the principles of the Revolution, including the proclamation of the natural rights of man, governmental policies based on a rational assessment of social utility, and a moderate redistribution of property through reform of taxation and the inheritance laws. However, Millar also maintained that ominous forces were being unleashed by the Revolution. He understood that the new style of warfare conducted by the French republic was ideological and committed to crushing its opponents – in contrast to limited warfare fought by standing armies over conflicting state interests within an international system characterised by balance of power. Millar further comprehended that the French Revolutionary armies combined the training and discipline of the early modern French standing army – the most powerful in Europe – with the zeal and enthusiasm of the citizen army, committed to spreading revolutionary ideals and achieving national glory. For Millar, the revolutionary warfare after 1793 was not only giving a new direction to the French Revolution, but was also transforming Europe in fundamental ways.

Plassart also devotes considerable attention to the Scottish moral philosopher and historian, Adam Ferguson (1723-1816), professor of pneumatics and moral philosophy (mental and moral philosophy) at the University of Edinburgh from 1764 to 1785. A former military chaplain, Ferguson had been a warm advocate of a Scottish militia in the 1760s, arguing that a citizen's militia would promote civic virtue, social hierarchy and a martial spirit. It was hardly surprising, then, that in the 1790s Ferguson placed 'the army at the very centre of his analysis of the French Revolution' (p. 139), emphasising the heightened

violence of the revolutionary warfare, the influence of democratic ideals in the French army, and the role of universal conscription in forging a French national spirit. The democratic zeal of the French citizen army, when combined with France's earlier military traditions, explained why the revolutionary armies were overwhelming existing monarchical states and shattering the European order. Only the promotion of civic virtue, martial spirit and citizen militias, Fergusson argued, would enable the European states to mount a successful resistance to French militarism and expansionism.

The third part of Plassart's book considers Scottish intellectual responses to revolutionary nationalism and the Napoleonic Empire during the period 1802-1815, giving particular attention to the young Whig reformers of the *Edinburgh Review*, among them Francis Jeffrey, Henry Brougham, James Mill, Francis Horner, and James Mackintosh, who as students at Scottish universities had imbibed the thought of the later Scottish Enlightenment. She shows how, under the influence of Millar and Ferguson, these young Whigs developed a version of civic virtue in the form of enlightened public opinion. Through popular education and a responsible free press, nations could inculcate an enlightened patriotism, which would empower their people to resist the new militant nationalism, ideological warfare, and aspirations for universal dominion that had been unleashed by the French Revolution. In her final chapter, she considers how contributors to the *Edinburgh Review* endeavoured to revive the interpretations of Hume and Smith regarding an historical 'progress of morals towards a commercial sociability' (p. 40). The reviewers combined these interpretations with promotion of national and international public opinion, and of the rights of small nations within a concert of Europe.

Plassart's study is important, not only for an understanding of the Scottish intellectual responses to the French Revolution and the revolutionary warfare, but also for an understanding of the latter phases of the Enlightenment in Scotland. The book is especially

valuable for placing the later Scottish Enlightenment within its larger European context, and showing how Scottish thinkers adapted the earlier ideas of progress in politeness and sociability to the new spirit of democratic nationalism. The high Scottish Enlightenment had been largely the product of elite culture – of universities, fashionable urban pulpits, learned societies, dining clubs, private libraries, lordships of robe and sword, and country houses. But the young Whig reformers of the *Edinburgh Review*, responding to the militant nationalism of Napoleonic Europe, worked to disseminate the Enlightenment ideas of progress, civic virtue, and sociability more widely in society, and to promote an enlightened public opinion, shaped by popular education. As such, they helped to communicate the moral culture of the Scottish Enlightenment to a more democratic era, and to promote a liberal nationalism.

What is missing in Plassart's account is any attention to religious thought. Thomas Ahnert's book made a convincing case for the continuing importance of theological language in the moral culture of the Scottish Enlightenment. But we have no references to such theological language in Plassart's study. We learn nothing from her study of how Scottish thinkers responded to the religious policies of the French Revolution, including the efforts in 1793-94 to suppress the Catholic Church and promote state cults of the supreme being and republican virtues. Nor is there any attention to the intensifying Evangelical Revival in Scotland from the 1790s, the leading role played by both Moderate and Evangelical ministers in the defining the moral arguments behind Scottish anti-slavery campaign from 1792, the emergence of the modern Scottish overseas mission movement from 1796, or the growing influence of a group of able younger Whig Evangelicals, educated in the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment and including such figures as Andrew Thomson, David and James Brewster,



Stevenson Macgill, Henry Duncan of Ruthwell, and, after 1811, Thomas Chalmers.<sup>11</sup> In 1810, these Whig-Evangelicals established the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, modelled on the *Edinburgh Review*; they promoted popular education, popular savings banks, the more humane care of the poor, the abolition of the slave trade and overseas missions. The Whig-Evangelicals sought to unite the learning of the Enlightenment with zeal for conversions and for a godly commonwealth; they promoted an enlightened Christian public opinion in response to the upheavals of the French Revolution. Their intellectual contributions warranted some discussion.

\*\*\*

Thomas Ahnert has developed a convincing argument for the continuing importance of theological language and Christian conceptions in the moral thought of the Scottish Enlightenment. He has shown how Scottish Presbyterianism played a fundamental role in shaping ideas of the disciplined Christian life, with the aim of shaping a constant, virtuous character. Further, he has demonstrated that this Presbyterian discipline contributed to a moral ‘culture of the mind’ in eighteenth-century Scotland, one that profoundly influenced the moral thought of the Enlightenment. He does not reject the more conventional views of the ‘science of man’, but he does maintain that Scotland’s eighteenth-century philosophers drew heavily from earlier theological conceptions. Anna Plassart has given a different picture of the later Scottish Enlightenment, as it confronted the profound upheavals associated with the French Revolution and the rise of democratic nationalism. She focuses on the importance of historical conceptions of progress, rather than Presbyterian theology, in the moral thought of the Scottish Enlightenment. She emphasises the influence of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 70-106; G. White, ‘“Highly Preposterous”: Origins of Scottish Missions’, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 19 (1976), pp. 111-24; Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 46-61.

historical vision of David Hume and Adam Smith, and their view of human progress, through commerce, towards increasing sociability, politeness and civilisation. The violence of the French Revolution, and especially the decades of revolutionary and Napoleonic warfare represented a profound challenge to that historical conception. But in the early years of the nineteenth century, the progressive vision of the Scottish Enlightenment was finding new, more popular forms, in conceptions of an enlightened national and international public opinion, and a liberal nationalism. Her analysis is broadly convincing, though her arguments would likely have been enriched with more attention to Scotland's religious culture, and especially the Evangelical movement and its calls for the abolition of slavery and the spread of Christian civilisation through overseas missions. The historical vision of Scotland's Enlightenment, as she observes, would contribute to the development of a liberal nationalism in Europe. But in the nineteenth century, Scotland would also become arguably the world's most celebrated missionary nation, and along with the Christian gospel, Scottish missionaries would seek to carry the contributions of their Enlightenment – through education, medical missions, and moral example – to the wider world.