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STEWART J. BROWN

William Robertson, Early Orientalism and the *Historical Disquisition* on India of 1791

ABSTRACT

In 1791, the celebrated Scottish historian, William Robertson, published his final work, *An Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*, in which he explored the commercial and cultural connections of India and the West from ancient times to the end of the fifteenth century. This article considers Robertson's *Historical Disquisition* within the contexts of the Scottish Enlightenment, the early British 'orientalist' movement, and the expansion of British dominion in India. It argues that while the work reflected the assumptions and approaches of the British orientalist school, Robertson—sensitive to criticisms that his previous *History of America* had been too dismissive of Amerindian cultures—went further than many orientalists in his positive portrayal of Indian culture and his opposition to an interventionist imperial policy. Indeed, the work was largely directed to preserving the ancient and sophisticated Indian civilisation from Western cultural imperialism. The article further suggests that Robertson's favourable view of what he perceived as monotheist beliefs underlying 'classical' Hinduism reveals much about his own religious attitudes as a clergyman and leader of the 'moderate' party in the Church of Scotland. His history of India would be under-valued in Britain (despite its large sales), in large part because his apology for Hinduism and his critique of Christian missions ran counter to the rising tide of the evangelical revival. However, it had a considerable role in promoting interest in India on the European continent, and it represented one of the more significant achievements of the late Scottish Enlightenment.

In 1791, the eminent Scottish historian William Robertson published his final work, a volume entitled *An Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*. It had been fourteen years since the publication of his last original work, the *History of America*, and many must have believed that Robertson had long since ceased historical research. His health was poor. Yet he began writing this

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history of India at the age of sixty-eight, and completed it in within a year. It was a curious work, in three main parts. The first part consisted of a narrative account focusing on the trade connections linking Europe and India from the earliest periods of recorded history up to Vasco da Gama's voyage around the Cape of Africa to India in 1498. The second part was an Appendix, almost equal in length to the first part of the book, in which he provided a thematic account of Indian civilisation from ancient times to the present, discussing Indian social structures, law codes, philosophy, ethics, scientific achievements, literature and religion. Finally, the volume included, as had been the case in all Robertson's previous histories, a long section of 'Notes and Illustrations', in which he engaged critically with the historical sources, including the recent writings and translations by the able group of British scholar-administrators working mainly in Bengal, known as the 'orientalists'.

On the face of it, Robertson's *Historical Disquisition* did not fit well with his previous corpus of historical writing. He had written three major historical works – a history of Scotland, a history of Europe during the reign of Charles V, and a history of America. All three works had focused on the sixteenth century, which Robertson – following the lead of his teacher, Charles Mackie, professor of civil law at Edinburgh University – viewed as marking the birth of the modern world.¹ All had a Eurocentric approach – exploring the making of the modern bureaucratic state in Europe, the development of a European state system characterised by the balance of power, and the origins and expansion of European colonialism in the New World. All three works were also structured around a political narrative. In the *Historical Disquisition*, however, he shifted his time period to antiquity and the middle ages and he moved the geographic setting to central Asia, north-eastern Africa, the eastern Mediterranean and the Indian sub-continent. He also shifted from a political narrative to an account of commercial relations, technological innovations, and cultural connections. Moreover, he made a conscious effort, especially in the Appendix, to move away from a Eurocentric approach and write with empathy of the civilisation of the Indian sub-continent.

Despite these new directions, the work was an appropriate conclusion to his historical career. In choosing the subject of European relations with India, Robertson was taking on what would be world-shaping movements of the next century – the expansion of European economic imperialism in the East, and the growth of European dominion over Asian populations who possessed sophisticated, ancient civilisations. His final history widened the circle of his historical vision – from Scotland, to Europe, to Europe's expanding western frontier in the Americas, and now to Europe's expanding eastern frontier in Asia

¹ D. B. Horn, 'Principal William Robertson, historian', *University of Edinburgh Journal* 18 (1956) 155–68 at 165.

and beyond. Almost certainly the *Historical Disquisition* is incomplete, representing only a portion of a much larger work on European relations with India from ancient times to the eighteenth century that he had hoped to write; Robertson may well have brought the work to an early end, aware that his health and energy were beginning to fail.² But even in its truncated form, it is impressive in its vision.

In comparison with his other histories, the *Historical Disquisition* has received little attention from scholars. In the earliest biography of Robertson, first published in 1796, the Scottish philosopher and political economist, Dugald Stewart, was gently dismissive of the historian's last work. The first part of the *Historical Disquisition*, Stewart maintained, failed to appeal to 'ordinary readers' while the Appendix on the literature, manners and institutions of India was very soon superseded by better informed scholarship. For Stewart, the work was significant mainly for showing that Robertson had an 'enlightened curiosity' even in 'his most advanced years'.³ Writing on Robertson a half century later, the Whig politician and essayist, Henry, Lord Brougham, applauded Robertson's empathetic approach to Indian culture, but maintained that the *Historical Disquisition* 'had been rendered less useful' by further scholarship and he disposed of the work in a single paragraph of faint praise.⁴ In his *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* of 1908, Henry Grey Graham was scathing about the *Disquisition*, which he claimed 'counts for nothing as literature'.⁵ In their accounts of Robertson's historical achievements, J. B. Black (1926) and David Womersley (1986) simply ignored the work.⁶ More recently, however, there has been a new interest in the *Disquisition*, connected in part with a growing recognition of the role of empire in shaping Scottish culture and politics. In a volume of essays on Robertson published in 1997, the literary scholar, Geoffrey Carnall of the University of Edinburgh, contributed a wide-ranging essay on 'Robertson and Contemporary Images of India' in which he considered the *Historical Disquisition* within the context of the emerging evangelical

² My belief that the work was unfinished is based on a view of the text. The main body of the work resembles in content and length the extensive historical introductions to his *History of the Reign of Charles V* and his *History of America*, while the Appendix would have been more appropriate in length if it had been added to a work of the size of Robertson's previous three histories. Nicholas Phillipson also viewed the work as 'curiously unfinished'. See N. Phillipson, 'Providence and progress: an introduction to the historical thought of William Robertson', in S. J. Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* (Cambridge, 1997), 55–73, at 71.

³ D. Stewart, 'Account of the life and writings of William Robertson' (1796), in R. B. Sher, N. Phillipson and J. Smitten (eds), *The Works of William Robertson*, 12 vols (London, 1996), xii, 166.

⁴ Henry, Lord Brougham, 'Robertson' (1855), in *Works of William Robertson*, xii, 303.

⁵ H. Grey Graham, *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1908), 97.

⁶ J. B. Black, *The Art of History: A Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1926); D. Womersley, 'The historical writings of William Robertson', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986) 497–506; J. Smitten, 'Robertson's letters and the life of writing', in Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, 36–54, at 50.

and romantic visions of India. His argument was concerned largely with the changing images of India between about 1790 and 1830, and he was less concerned with the content of the *Historical Disquisition* – though he did argue that the work had been under-rated.⁷ Other contributors to the same volume, most notably Jeffrey Smitten and Nicholas Phillipson, also discussed the *Historical Disquisition* favourably.⁸ In *The Scottish Empire*, published in 2001, Michael Fry applauded the empathetic approach of Robertson's *Historical Disquisition* and argued that Robertson's belief in the role of free trade in promoting cultural understanding helped to shape the Victorian belief in the slogan of 'Christianity, commerce and civilisation'.⁹ The French scholar, Pierre Briant, in his Stubbs Lecture of October 2005 at the University of Toronto, explored Robertson's portrayal of Alexander the Great in the first part of the *Historical Disquisition*, arguing that Robertson's account of Alexander as 'enlightened philosopher-king' was important in the renewed European interest in Alexander and his world.¹⁰

Most recently, in his *Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture: India, 1770–1880* (2007), Michael Dodson referred briefly to Robertson's *Historical Disquisition* – noting that Robertson drew heavily from the British orientalist scholars working in India and that his history reflected the approaches of the early orientalists.¹¹ Dodson's excellent book was informed by the thesis of the late Edward Said, for whom 'Orientalism' represented a European mindset which viewed the inhabitants of Asia as 'the Others' – and as 'essentially' passive, inscrutable, degenerate, exotic, effeminate, religious, superstitious, irrational and weak. For Said, the 'Orientalist' mindset developed alongside and profoundly influenced Western colonial governance, including the government of India; it formed a discourse that underpinned Western imperialism, by contributing to the subjugation and control the Asian 'Others'.¹² Said's thesis has aroused passionate debate in the thirty years since its first publication. His critics have noted that his work relied largely on French sources and focused mainly on the Islamic regions of North Africa and West Asia, while he devoted relatively little attention to the school of British orientalist scholarship that flourished in Bengal in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Said's approach, his critics aver, is unhistorical and

⁷ G. Carnall, 'Robertson and contemporary images of India', in Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, 210–30.

⁸ Smitten, 'Robertson's letters and the life of writing' and Phillipson, 'Providence and progress', 50–3, 71–3.

⁹ M. Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (Edinburgh, 2001), 89–90, 156.

¹⁰ P. Briant, 'Alexander the Great and the Enlightenment: William Robertson (1721–1793), the empire and the road to India', Stubbs Lecture, University of Toronto, October 2005, Cromohs, 10 (2005): 1–9 < URL: http://www.unifi.it/riviste/cromohs/10_05/briant_robertson.html > .

¹¹ M. S. Dodson, *Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture: India, 1770–1880* (London, 2007), 1–6.

¹² E. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978), espec. chap 1.

fails sufficiently to differentiate among individual agents and social contexts.¹³ 'It creates', according to Rosane Rocher, 'a single discourse, undifferentiated in space and time and across social and intellectual identities'.¹⁴ None the less, as Dodson has noted, Said's work, while not forming a comprehensive history, gives some attention to the British orientalists in India and provides valuable insights into the relations of knowledge and power in British India.

This article will explore Robertson's *Historical Disquisition* within the contexts of the Scottish Enlightenment, the early British orientalist movement, and the expansion of British dominion in India. It will consider the content of Robertson's final work, giving particular attention to its celebration of free trade and its sympathetic treatment of Hindu culture and religion. The article will argue that the *Historical Disquisition* reflected many of the assumptions and insights of the British orientalist school, but it will also note that Robertson went further than most orientalists in his positive view of Indian culture and in his opposition to an active, interventionist imperial policy. Indeed, he seemed aware in this work of the traps of what Said would later portray as the 'Orientalist' frame of mind, including the use of knowledge as a means to subjugate and control the 'Other', and he sought to confront and rise above such a misuse of knowledge. Further, the article will suggest that Robertson's favourable comments about what he perceived as deist beliefs underlying a 'classical' Hinduism may be revealing of his own religious attitudes. His history of India would be neglected and under-rated in Britain, in large part because its apology for Hinduism and critique of Christian missions ran counter to the rising tide of the evangelical revival and missionary movement. However, it played a considerable role in promoting interest in India on the European continent, and represented one of the more significant achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment.

William Robertson (1721–93) and India

William Robertson was a leading figure in that unique flourishing of intellectual culture referred to as the Scottish Enlightenment.¹⁵ As a Church of Scotland parish minister from 1743, and especially as

¹³ D. Kopf, 'Hermeneutics versus history', *Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (1980) 495–506; J. M. MacKenzie, 'Edward Said and the historians', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 18 (1994) 9–23; C. A. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, 1993), 3–12; A. L. Macfie, *Orientalism* (London, 2002), 73–101.

¹⁴ R. Rocher, 'British Orientalism in the eighteenth century: the dialectics of knowledge and government', in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, 215–47, at 215.

¹⁵ For recent assessments of Robertson's life and contributions in Church and University, see R. B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton, 1985); S. J. Brown, 'William Robertson (1721–1793) and the Scottish Enlightenment', in Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, 7–35.

minister of the prestigious Old Greyfriars parish church in Edinburgh from 1761, Robertson disseminated a mild and reasonable version of Christianity. He discouraged religious enthusiasm and intolerance, and emphasised instead a practical morality. He encouraged literary pursuits among his fellow ministers and their participation in the learned societies and debating clubs that were vital to the Scottish Enlightenment. From the early 1750s, he played a key role in shaping an effective moderate party within Scotland's national Church—a party that was committed to curbing popular religious enthusiasm, supporting aristocratic and crown patronage in the appointment of ministers, and promoting a comprehensive national Church. Between 1766 and 1780, Robertson exercised a personal ascendancy within the Church of Scotland, advising the Crown on matters of Church patronage and dominating, through his knowledge of Church law and practice, the debates in the General Assembly (Scotland's supreme ecclesiastical court). In 1762, he was appointed principal of the University of Edinburgh, a position he combined with the ministry of Greyfriars parish. During the next thirty years he presided over the transformation of Edinburgh's town college into a leading European university, with particular strength in medicine and moral philosophy. He was active in expanding the university library, improving the quality of new appointments to university posts, promoting scholarship and initiating new construction, including the beginning of the imposing Old College building. Student numbers increased from about 500 in 1763 to 1,255 in 1791.¹⁶ During the noontide of the Scottish Enlightenment, Robertson was pre-eminent within Scotland's national establishment—the synthesis of national Church, universities, and civic society that shaped the nation's cultural identity.

Robertson's eminence in Scotland was based largely upon his achievements as one of Europe's leading historians: he was a figure who stood alongside Edward Gibbon, David Hume and Voltaire in defining the historical project of the Enlightenment. His first major work, the *History of Scotland during the Reigns of Queen Mary and James VI* was published in 1759 and achieved almost immediate critical acclaim. Its appeal lay partly in the drama of its themes: the tempestuous and tragic reign of Mary, Queen of Scots, the coming of the Reformation, and the struggle of the young James VI to impose the rule of law upon his unruly Scots subjects. The work culminated in the Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland in 1603 and the emergence of more effective structures of civil government—bringing the promise of agricultural improvement and commercial expansion. Robertson's second major work, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, appeared ten years later in 1769. Its appearance was a publishing sensation, and

¹⁶ D. B. Horn, *A Short History of the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1967), 77–86; A. Dalzel, *History of the University of Edinburgh from its Foundation*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1862), ii, 430–40; A. Bower, *History of the University of Edinburgh*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1830), iii, 93–5; M. Cosh, *Edinburgh: The Golden Age* (Edinburgh, 2003), 118.

Robertson received some £4,000 for the copyright, reputedly the largest amount paid for any scholarly work in the eighteenth century. It was immediately translated into French and then into several European languages.¹⁷ In Robertson's account, the reign of Charles V (1519–56) formed a watershed in European history, marking the waning of the ideal of a universal Christian monarchy, and the emergence of the modern system of nation-states, bound together by a balance of power and a shared Christian humanism. This work was followed in 1777 by Robertson's *History of America*, generally regarded as his crowning achievement. It provided an account of the sixteenth-century Spanish exploration and settlement of the New World, including the conquest of the Aztec and Inca empires. The celebrated Book IV of the *History of America* was a pioneering study of Amerindian life, using the approaches of historical anthropology to analyse the social behaviour of the indigenous American peoples.¹⁸ Robertson's three histories taken together formed a grand narrative of the rise of the nation-states of western Europe to global pre-eminence. He had planned to expand his *History of America* to include the British settlements in North America, and had made a start on the work, but then abandoned the project amid the turmoil and passions surrounding the American War of Independence. In the 1780s, his career seemed to be drawing to a close. He had resigned from the active management of Church affairs in 1780, in part as a result of ill-health and in part because of pain over the virulent sectarian bigotry pouring forth from the Church courts in protest against parliament's efforts to ease the anti-Catholic penal laws. Describing Robertson in the pulpit in July 1789, the English poet, Samuel Rogers, observed that 'his manner was striking, but not graceful; his voice not displeasing. He spoke and looked like a good man'.¹⁹ During the 1780s, Robertson revised his main historical works for publication in a final, definitive edition.²⁰ And then he turned his attention to the history of India.

'I have' Robertson informed an unnamed bookseller in August 1789, 'been engaged for some time in an enquiry into the antient state of India'.²¹ The occasion for this interest in the Asian subcontinent, he later explained in the preface of the *Historical Disquisition*, was his reading of James Rennell's *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*, a work of historical geography that was first published in 1783 and then in a

¹⁷ R. B. Sher, 'Charles V and the book trade: an episode in Enlightenment print culture', in Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, 164–95.

¹⁸ E. Adamson Hoebel, 'William Robertson: an 18th century anthropological historian', *American Anthropologist* 62 (1960) 648–55; S. J. Brown, 'An eighteenth-century historian on the Amerindians', *Studies in World Christianity* 2 (1996) 204–22.

¹⁹ Quoted in Cosh, *Edinburgh: The Golden Age*, 112.

²⁰ Smitten, 'Robertson's letters and the life of writing', 47–50.

²¹ W. Robertson to anon., 8 Aug. 1789, University of Edinburgh Library, Ms Gen. 1733/38.

revised and much expanded version in 1788.²² This work, Robertson observed, inspired him to further research, initially for his 'own amusement and instruction', and then, he hoped, for the amusement and instruction of others.²³ But, along with his curiosity, there were other, more compelling factors at work behind Robertson's decision to write a history of India.

From the later 1760s, following the British conquest of Bengal, there had been significant developments in the study of the languages and literature of the Indian sub-continent, promoted by an exceptional group of scholars, the British 'orientalists', many of whom served in India with the East India Company and benefited from the patronage of Warren Hastings, a scholar of Persian literature and governor of Bengal from 1772.²⁴ By the Judicial Plan of 1772, Hastings and the Company had decided that they would govern Bengal according to Indian law, rather than British law. This meant that Company officials had to understand Indian law, and the religious and cultural traditions that lay behind it.²⁵ By supporting the scholarship of the orientalists, Hastings aimed to promote such an understanding. Further, he also sought to give a degree of respectability and legitimacy to the Company's new government of Bengal, by portraying his administration as heir to the Mughal rulers. As C. A. Bayly has observed, 'Hastings and his circle . . . sought to portray themselves as inheritors of the Indian polity as refounded by the [Mughal] Emperor Akbar. They needed to inherit the knowledge and particularly the political knowledge of the former rulers'.²⁶ But their interests were not solely political. The orientalists were also drawn to the study of Indian history and literature from a spirit of intellectual curiosity and exploration that was not 'motivated by or applicable to governmental concerns'.²⁷

Most early British orientalist scholars had a highly favourable view of Indian religion. A number of them had come under the influence of European 'natural religion', or deism, and believed they could discern in ancient Hinduism a pure form of monotheistic belief with an ethical code rooted in a rational faith in the one true creator and sustainer of the universe. Among those taking this view were John Zephaniah Howell, who published a history of India in

²² J. Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan; or the Mogul's Empire* (London: M. Brown, 1783); J. Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan; or the Mogul Empire* (London, 1788).

²³ W. Robertson, *An Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*, 2nd edn (1794), in Sher, Phillipson and Smitten (eds), *Works of William Robertson*, x, p. iii.

²⁴ P. J. Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1970), 1–44; J. L. Brockington, 'Warren Hastings and Orientalism', in G. Carnall and C. Nicholson (eds), *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (Edinburgh, 1989), 91–108.

²⁵ D. Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1969), 13–21; Dodson, *Orientalism, Empire and National Culture*, 19–22; Rocher, 'British Orientalism in the eighteenth century', 220–2.

²⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996), 52.

²⁷ Rocher, 'British Orientalism in the eighteenth century', 219.

1767, and Alexander Dow, whose translation of Firishtah's *History of Hindostan* appeared in 1768.²⁸ In 1776, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed published at the Company's expense in London a seminal work, the *Code of Gentoo Laws*—a translation from the Persian rendition of the Sanskrit code of laws, with a lengthy preface in which Halhed gave a sympathetic account of Hinduism and argued there were striking similarities between the ethics of the Hindu and Christian religions.²⁹ Robertson greatly admired Halhed's work, and drew upon it heavily in his history.³⁰ In 1785, Charles Wilkins, the first British scholar to master the Sanskrit language, translated, with Hastings' patronage, the *Bhagavad Gītā* into English. Published in London at the Company's expense, the work introduced British readers to the stirring poetry of this ancient religious text, and encouraged further comparisons between the ethical teachings of the Christian and Hindu religions.³¹ The Welsh legal scholar, poet and linguist, William Jones, arrived in Bengal in 1783. Already a master of Arabic and Persian, he soon began learning Sanskrit. In 1784, Jones and Wilkins founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal, with Hastings as the first president; the society began publishing a journal, *Asiatick Researches*, with learned articles on Indian geography, culture and religion. In 1789, Jones translated a Sanskrit play, Kalidāsa's *Sacotalā*, which portrayed the entrancement of an Indian king by the sensuous beauty of court dancer. The work was soon translated into German by the ethnologist, Georg Forster, and *Sacotalā* became a European sensation during the 1790s, deeply impressing such luminaries as Schiller, Novalis, Schlegel, Goethe and Chateaubriand.³² The British orientalists came to their subject with training in the classical languages of Greek and Latin, and believed that they were uncovering for the first time the rich Sanskrit literature of a 'golden age', or a classical age of an ancient Indian civilisation that might have formed the fountainhead of all civilisations.³³ William Jones, for example, wrote of his Sanskrit scholarship that it was as though ancient Greek literature had been lost for centuries and was only now re-emerging.³⁴ He grew convinced that there were strong similarities between the Sanskrit, Greek and Latin languages—so much so that

²⁸ W. Halbfass, *Indien und Europe: Perspektiven ihrer geistigen Begegnung* (Basel, 1981), 70–7.

²⁹ N. B. Halhed, *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or Ordinations of the Pundits, from a Persian Translation* (London, 1776), i–lxxiv. For Halhed's career, see R. Roher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millennium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed* (Delhi, 1983).

³⁰ Robertson, *An Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*, 250–1; Marshall, *British Discovery of Hinduism*, 39; Roher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millennium*, 55.

³¹ *The Bhāgvat-Gītā: The Hētopādēs of Vēshnōṣ-Sārmā*, trans. Charles Wilkins (1785), intro. by M. Franklin (London, 2001).

³² M. J. Franklin, *Sir William Jones* (Cardiff, 1995), 99–101.

³³ Kopf, *British Orientalism*, 22–42.

³⁴ Quoted in Roher, 'British Orientalism in the eighteenth century', 233.

'no philologist could examine all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source'.³⁵

In 1785, the orientalist lost their leading patron when Warren Hastings resigned as governor of Bengal. Hastings had also been accused of ruling in India like an 'Eastern potentate', and allegations of corruption, extortion, torture and murder had haunted his administration. In May 1787, he was formally impeached by the House of Commons for a number of alleged crimes committed during his tenure as governor. His chief accuser was Robertson's friend and fellow historian, Edmund Burke. The trial began in February 1788 and continued for seven long years, capturing the interest of the political nation (at least during the early months) and focusing attention on Indian customs, the nature of Britain's emerging dominion in India, and the challenges of governing peoples of differing cultures and religions.

A significant number of Scots, meanwhile, had been finding opportunities for advancement in India, either with the East India Company or with the army in Bengal. As Tom Devine has shown, the prospects of service in India were highly prized in Scotland, and East India Company patronage was vital in securing the loyalty of the Scottish elite and consolidating the Union of England and Scotland.³⁶ In Bengal, between 1774 and 1785, 47 per cent of appointments as East India Company Writers went to Scots, as well as 49 per cent of appointments as officer cadets and 50 per cent as assistant surgeons.³⁷ 'Of the fourteen royal regiments which served in India between 1754 and 1784', observed G. J. Bryant, 'seven had been raised in Scotland, amounting to some 4,000–5,000 men'.³⁸ Some individual Scots, especially following the Company's establishment of dominion over Bengal after 1757, amassed vast fortunes through private trading and returned to purchase Scottish estates and political influence. They included Peter Murray, who returned with a reputed £200,000, and John Johnstone, who returned with an estimated £300,000, which he used to purchase three Scottish estates.³⁹ Writing in 1814, Thomas Somerville, a Church of Scotland minister, observed that the vast fortunes of those returning from the East Indies during the previous fifty years had transformed Scotland; in his neighbourhood alone he knew of eight estates purchased by men returning from the East.⁴⁰ In 1784, Sir Henry Dundas became president of the East India Company Board of Control, a post he would hold until 1801. Sensitive to expectations that he would abuse his influence to reward his fellow Scots with India patronage, Dundas may have actually reduced the

³⁵ Quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, 79; see also Kopf, *British Orientalism*, 38.

³⁶ T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600–1815* (London, 2004), 250–70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁸ G. J. Bryant, 'Scots in India in the eighteenth century', *SHR* 64 (1985) 22–41, at 23–4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–8.

⁴⁰ T. Somerville, *My Own Life and Times 1741–1814* (Edinburgh, 1861), 359–60.

number of Scots holding posts in India.⁴¹ None the less, there was a perception that his presidency strengthened the connection of Scotland and India. Meanwhile, several Scots, among them Alexander Hamilton, John B. Gilchrist, William Hunter, and James Mackintosh, emerged as prominent 'orientalists' and made significant contributions to scholarship on Indian culture and religion.⁴²

Robertson's own family was part of the Scottish connection with India, with two of his younger sons, James and David, serving as officers with the army in India. As Jeffrey Smitten has observed, this India connection was valued highly by Robertson, who had used political influence to get his sons their posts and supported them financially in those posts for a number of years. James saw active service in the campaign against Haider Ali in 1781, and would eventually rise to the rank of general. David arrived in India in 1782, and though forced to come home because of illness in 1784, he later returned to military and administrative service in the East.⁴³ Through his correspondence with his sons and his efforts to promote their careers, Robertson was acutely aware that the Company was expanding its military control over more and more territory in India during the 1780s, and that relations between Britain and India were entering a new phase—one that might well see the Company state gain dominion over the entire sub-Continent.

As Robertson knew, European dominion could have devastating consequences for a non-European people. His *History of America* of 1777 had chronicled the virtual annihilation of the Amerindian populations of the Caribbean islands following the Spanish arrival, as well as the immense loss of life resulting from the Spanish conquests of the Aztec and Inca empires. His accounts were often harrowing. None the less, by the 1780s, he was coming under criticism for not having condemned the Spanish policies towards the Amerindians strongly enough. Some argued that he had not only covered over many dark deeds of Spanish colonists and conquistadors, but that his negative portrayals of Amerindian 'savagery' were an attempt to excuse the European cruelty. His *History of America*, for example, was attacked by the creole Jesuit historian, Francisco Javier Clavigero, whose own history of Mexico was published in Spanish in 1780–1 and then in English translation in 1787.⁴⁴ Clavigero criticised Robertson for relying too heavily on European documentary sources in his depiction of Amerindian culture, for ignoring evidence—including American paintings, sculptures, carvings and other artefacts that gave a

⁴¹ Fry, *Scottish Empire*, 85.

⁴² J. Rendall, 'Scottish Orientalists: from Robertson to James Mill', *Historical Journal* 25 (1982) 43–69.

⁴³ Smitten, 'Robertson's letters and the life of writing', 52–3.

⁴⁴ B. Lenman, "'From savage to Scot" via the French and Spaniards: Principal Robertson's Spanish sources', in Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, 196–209, at 203–5.

positive view of those cultures – and for being too ready to dismiss the Amerindians as savages. In short, he accused Robertson of distorting history, and portraying Amerindian cultures as degenerate and inferior, in order to mitigate the European destruction of those cultures.⁴⁵ Robertson defended his approach against Clavigero's critique in the preface to the fifth edition of his *History of America* in 1788. But educated opinion in Britain was turning against Robertson's negative depiction of the Amerindians. For example, as Silvia Sebastiani has shown, the article on 'America' in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published by a group of Scots between 1777 and 1784, had relied upon Robertson's negative portrayal of Amerindians. However, this now changed, and the 'America' article in the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia* (the first volumes of which appeared in the later 1780s) rejected Robertson's position, and gave the more positive view of Amerindians being presented by Clavigero and other scholars (including the American, Thomas Jefferson).⁴⁶ Robertson's *History of America* was becoming viewed as excessively Eurocentric and dismissive of non-Europeans. In response, he may well have wanted to show his public that he could write with sensitivity and understanding of non-European cultures. The history of India provided an opportunity.

Historical Disquisition: trade between East and West

Robertson completed the *Historical Disquisition* by May 1790, and it was published as a single volume a year later in May 1791. His friend Hugh Blair and several others read the book in manuscript and assisted with the style. Sensitive to the fact that he had never visited India, Robertson also asked several individuals who had spent time in India to read the manuscript: they included Colonel William Fullarton, who had served in India during the 1780s, and James Anderson, an Edinburgh graduate who had become surgeon-general in Madras. Robertson took a detailed interest in the book's production, including thickness of paper and size of the margins. Although describing himself as one of Britain's oldest living authors, he also confided to a friend that 'I feel myself as much afraid as ever to venture again before the Publick'.⁴⁷ Thomas Cadell paid Robertson £1,111 for the copyright, a substantial sum, which was calculated according to the length of the *Disquisition* when compared to Robertson's *History of America*, and thus on the publisher's

⁴⁵ F. S. Clavigero, *The History of Mexico: Collected from Spanish and Mexican Historians, from Manuscripts, and Ancient Paintings of the Indians*, 2 vols (London, 1787), i, pp. xxvi–xxvii, xxix–xxx.

⁴⁶ S. Sebastiani, 'The changing features of the Americans in the eighteenth-century *Britannica*', in L. Passerini (ed.), *Across the Atlantic: Cultural Exchanges between Europe and the United States* (Brussels, 2000), 39–57.

⁴⁷ Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland [NLS], Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3944, fos 20–1, Hugh Blair to W. Robertson, 24 May 1790; Smitten, 'Robertson's letters and the life of writing', 50; Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Library, William Robertson Papers, Ms 4512, William Robertson to Andrew Strachan, 23 Nov. 1790. I am grateful to Jeffrey Smitten for the information contained in this letter.

expectation that it would enjoy similar sales.⁴⁸ The book had an initial print run of 3,000 copies, which, Richard Sher has observed, was the same as the *History of America* and one of the highest of any Scottish work published in the eighteenth century.⁴⁹ 'I find', Robertson wrote to Edward Gibbon in August 1791, '... like other parents that I have a partial fondness for this child of my old age'.⁵⁰ Some readers were aware that the *Historical Disquisition* was written with an eye to shaping imperial policy. 'I am sure', Sir Henry Dundas wrote to Robertson in June 1791, that 'no body can read your work with attention without perceiving in it traces well calculated to aid our Indian statesmen of modern times'.⁵¹ Robertson was flattered, and admitted that he did hope to influence policy. 'Though my situation in life never led me to take any active part in the civil transactions of the kingdom', he responded to Dundas on 6 July 1791, 'my temper led me to observe what was going on with attention, & to form an opinion concerning them. I imagined that by tracing the progress of the trade of Europe with India, as far as very scanty materials enabled me, I might suggest some hints to an intelligent... Statesman, that might be of some practical use'. 'I am proud', he added, 'to think that my expectations have not been altogether chimerical'.⁵²

The first part of the *Historical Disquisition* presented an account of the relations between Europe and India from earliest recorded history to the end of the fifteenth century. The account was organised into three main sections. The first section was drawn primarily from Greek sources and explored the period from earliest times through the empire of Alexander the Great and up to the Roman conquest of Egypt. The second section provided a narrative account of trading connections during the era of the Roman empire up to the Arab irruption and Islamic dominance of West Asia. The third section considered the Islamic ascendancy in the West Asia, the Portuguese efforts to find a sea-route to India, and the voyage of Vasco da Gama around the Cape of Africa to India in 1498.

The emphasis throughout was on commerce and exploration. Robertson discussed the ancient caravan routes between India, China and the eastern Mediterranean, and argued that trade along these routes pre-dated surviving historical records. He considered the dangers and expense of these overland journeys by camel, and the efforts to find more economical water-borne routes on the Red Sea

⁴⁸ NLS, Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3944, fos 42–3, T. Cadell to W. Robertson, 17 May 1791.

⁴⁹ R. B. Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and the Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (Chicago, 2006), 86–7, footnote 80.

⁵⁰ Smitten, 'Robertson's letters and the life of writing', 50.

⁵¹ NLS, Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3944, fos 64–7, Henry Dundas to W. Robertson, 27 Jun. 1791; see also Ms 3944, fos 62–3, John Robinson to W. Robertson.

⁵² Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland, Melville Papers, GD 51/9/26, W. Robertson to Henry Dundas, 6 Jul. 1791. With appreciation to Jeffrey Smitten for directing my attention to this letter.

and Indian Oceans. In his account of the sea-borne trade with India, he discussed the slow development of adequate sea-going vessels, the advances in navigation, the different water-borne routes, the length of voyages, and the boldness, tempered by skill and common sense, of the unnamed early Egyptian and Phoenician traders who ventured upon these voyages. He devoted considerable attention to the history of map-making, commenting favourably on the accuracy and detail of the early maps. Through a careful textual analysis of works by Herodotus, Ptolemy and other ancient authors, he argued that ancient Egyptian and Phoenician traders had reached the east coast of India, travelling as far as Burma, and perhaps beyond. (He also discussed the early sea-borne trade expeditions sent from China westwards.) He considered the nature of the demand in ancient Egypt and Greece for Indian goods—spices, precious stones, silk and fine handicrafts.

Robertson devoted some twenty-three pages to Alexander the Great.⁵³ His emphasis was not on Alexander's military campaigns, but rather on his efforts to establish a universal state that would unite the known world, end all distinctions between 'victors and vanquished', and incorporate Europeans and Asians into 'one people', with the 'same laws' and the 'same manners, institutions, and discipline'.⁵⁴ Robertson portrayed Alexander as an enlightened philosopher-king, who pursued 'liberal' policies—adopting Persian dress following his conquest of Darius's empire, encouraging intermarriage between his Greek soldiers and Persian women, and seeking to gain 'the affection of the nations which he had subdued'.⁵⁵ He noted with approval Alexander's efforts to explore the Indus river in India as a potential trade route, and to found new cities along the Indus and across West Asia as means of facilitating trade and manufactures. These great projects, he observed, were unfortunately undermined by Alexander's early death and, more significantly, by the cultural arrogance of his fellow Greeks. 'The Greeks', he observed, 'had such an high opinion of the pre-eminence to which they were raised by civilization and science, that they seem hardly to have acknowledged the rest of mankind to be of the same species with themselves'.⁵⁶ As a result of this arrogance towards the 'others', Alexander's efforts to found a universal, enlightened state collapsed in the decades after his death.

Robertson directed his most favourable commentary to the relatively peaceful trading connections that linked civilisations over long periods of time—connections that he believed were too often neglected by historians, in their focus on battles, military campaigns and palace intrigues. The prospects of human flourishing, he argued, were better in states that engaged in facilitating peaceful trade between peoples than in those that strove for dominion over others. For example, he

⁵³ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 14–37.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 28–9; Briant, 'Alexander the Great and the Enlightenment', 6.

⁵⁶ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 29.

wrote warmly of the 'opulence and power' of the ancient city-state of Palmyra, which thrived for centuries by facilitating the caravan trade between India and the Mediterranean, and which transformed its desert location into a garden, with splendid buildings, a contented people, and a cosmopolitan culture. 'Its government', he observed, 'was of the form which is best suited to the genius of a commercial city, republican, and from the peculiar advantages of its situation, as well as the spirit of its inhabitants, it long maintained its independence, though surrounded by powerful and ambitious neighbours'.⁵⁷ He noted how later the city-states of Tyre, Genoa and Venice would similarly flourish by facilitating trade between the Mediterranean world and the East.

For Robertson, the efforts of great empires, whether the Alexandrine, the Roman or the Ottoman, to monopolise and control trade were never as effective in generating wealth or facilitating human happiness as the contributions of smaller, more entrepreneurial commercial societies that had no ambition for political dominion. His whole account was largely a hymn to the benefits of free trade. This is hardly surprising from a friend and admirer of Adam Smith. Another Scottish moralist, Hugh Blair, had, after reading the work in manuscript, encouraged Robertson to strengthen his arguments on the connection 'between extended trade and liberty'.⁵⁸ Robertson may also have shared in the growing concern over the effects of empire on Scotland—which was personified in the Scottish 'nabobs' who were returning from India with huge, often ill-gotten fortunes, flaunting their opulence, buying political influence and corrupting Scotland's civic virtue.⁵⁹ His distrust of empire was clear. While earlier in his career—for example, in Book VIII of his *History of America*—Robertson had often been an advocate of the civilising mission of empire, in this final work, he maintained that the world would be more peaceful, more prosperous and more content as an order of independent states, inculcating civic virtue and bound together by networks of free trade, than as a world order of great empires, waging wars to dominate markets and trade routes, and extend their military rule. The story of the Alexandrine empire demonstrated that even enlightened visions of universal empire were likely to darken through the all too human tendency of conquerors, in the arrogance of power, to treat subject peoples as less human than themselves. The lesson for Britain should be to resist the temptation to impose its notions of law and government, however enlightened these might seem, upon India. Rather, it should restrict its activities in India as far as possible to preserving peace and promoting trade.

'It is a cruel mortification', Robertson observed of his fellow historians, 'in searching for what is instructive in the history of past

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁸ NLS, Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3944, fos 20–1, Hugh Blair to W. Robertson, 24 May 1790.

⁵⁹ I am grateful to Dr Andrew Mackillop of the University of Aberdeen for this observation.

times, to find that the exploits of conquerors who have desolated the earth, and the freaks of tyrants who have rendered nations unhappy, are recorded with minute and often disgusting accuracy, while the discovery of useful arts, and the progress of the most beneficial branches of commerce, are passed over in silence, and suffered to sink into oblivion'.⁶⁰ The first part of the *Historical Disquisition* represented an effort to rescue the human achievements in the useful arts and peaceful commerce from the condescension of historians. A salient feature of Robertson's previous histories had been his often stirring depictions of towering individuals in the past, of world historical figures, such as Charles V, Christopher Columbus, or Hernando Cortez; he had shown great skill in portraying their characters and in shaping his historical narrative around their aspirations, strengths and weaknesses. In this final work, however, apart from Alexander the Great, there were no substantial character sketches. Even the great explorer, Marco Polo, received only a single page.⁶¹ Instead, Robertson celebrated the largely unknown entrepreneurs, explorers, ship-builders, navigators and map-makers, who responded to the demand for Indian goods by finding new trade routes and developing new technologies of transport. And with his emphasis on free trade, Robertson also endeavoured to portray the unity of human civilisation. There was, for Robertson, no clear demarcation between East and West, between the Greco-Roman and the Indian civilisations. Rather, like William Jones and other early British orientalist, he saw cross fertilisation between the civilisations of the Mediterranean and the Indus throughout recorded history. Although he did refer to the 'unchanging' nature of Indian civilisation and preferred his Western values to those of the East, he also sought to avoid an exclusively Western perspective. He consciously endeavoured to unroll further what Edmund Burke had described in a letter of 1777 as Robertson's 'great map of mankind'.⁶²

Historical Disquisition: appendix on Indian civilisation

When the *Historical Disquisition* appeared, it was the second part of the book, the lengthy Appendix on the civilisation of India, that most impressed his readers.⁶³ Robertson opened this Appendix by reminding his readers that Westerners through the centuries had been drawn to trade with India, not in search of raw materials, but in order to

⁶⁰ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 59.

⁶¹ 'How are we surprised to find dismissed in a page, a barren page, the labours of the man who first laid open the half of Asia to Europeans!' [John Pinkerton?], 'Robertson's Historical Disquisition concerning India', *Critical Review*, n.s., 3 (October 1791), 131.

⁶² NLS, Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3943, fos 17–18, E. Burke to W. Robertson, 9 Jun. 1777.

⁶³ 'The Subject of the Appendix', wrote James Rennell, 'was what interested the Public greatly'. NLS, Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3944, fos 68–71, 81–2, 113–14, James Rennell to W. Robertson, 2 Jul. 1791; see also William Coxe to W. Robertson, 2 Oct. 1791, Patrick Russell to W. Robertson, 1 Aug. 1791.

gain access to the exquisite 'manufactures and handicrafts' of the subcontinent. It was the *culture* of India that formed the real basis of its wealth. From earliest times, he maintained, 'the natives of India were not only more early civilized, but had made greater progress in civilization than any other people'.⁶⁴ He then proceeded to a laudatory discussion of the social structures, culture and religion of India.

He began with the contentious issue of caste. Perhaps surprisingly for a Scottish educator, he defended India's caste system, arguing that from earliest times caste had provided India with the subordination of social ranks that was necessary for the stability and harmony of advanced civilisation. By the caste system, he observed, 'the station of every individual is unalterably fixed; his destiny is irrevocable; and the walk of life is marked out, from which he must never deviate'.⁶⁵ Robertson acknowledged that the caste system restricted the rise of exceptional talent through the social ranks, and could 'confine to the functions of an inferior cast, talents fitted to shine in a higher sphere'. 'But', he continued, 'the arrangements of civil government are made, not for what is extraordinary, but for what is common; not for the few, but for the many'.⁶⁶ The caste system, he argued, was 'better adapted to attain the end in view [a well-ordered society], than a careless observer, at first sight, is apt to imagine'.⁶⁷ It provided a division of labour within Indian society. It meant that individuals learned a particular trade or craft from the earliest age and, by devoting their entire lives to that one trade or craft, they developed such skill that the work became natural and relatively effortless. It was their lifelong focus on a particular craft, he maintained, that accounted for the 'exquisite execution of their workmanship'. Under the caste system, he argued, the cultivators of the land also received respect and protection, placing agriculture on a secure foundation.

This traditional, caste-based Indian division of labour was of course different from that extolled by Adam Smith. It was not voluntary and was not organised by rational minds, nor could it be readily changed to accommodate technological progress. None the less, Robertson noted, the ancients had described the Indians 'as a most happy race of men', while in his own day 'the most intelligent modern observers... celebrated the equity, the humanity, and mildness of Indian policy'.⁶⁸ His account of caste is a reminder that Robertson was no egalitarian. As Nicholas Phillipson has observed, the importance of the subordination of social ranks was a consistent theme in Robertson's social thought.⁶⁹ Further, Robertson would have been aware that even

⁶⁴ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 229.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶⁹ Phillipson, 'Providence and progress', 72.

in his own relatively liberal society, it was the rare individual who rose up through the social ranks by hard work and ability.

Turning to the intellectual achievements of India, Robertson was still more fulsome in his praise. For him, the hereditary Brahmin caste formed an intellectual class, a learned society which reflected the Enlightenment ideal of a republic of letters. This intellectual class had gradually amassed a unique knowledge of the natural world through careful scientific observations conducted over long periods of time. He noted that India had invented the ten-digit system of numbers that became universal and formed the basis of all modern science.⁷⁰ Even more impressive, for Robertson—drawing on the research of the French scholar, Jean-Silvain Bailly—were the Indian astronomical tables for calculating the position of the sun and moon. These tables, some scholars then believed, may have gone back as far as 3,000 BCE. In reviewing the translations of ancient Sanskrit texts, he was struck by their similarities with the ethical and philosophical writings of the ancient Greeks, and especially by the similarities of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Greek stoic writings.⁷¹ The city of Benares, he insisted, had been ‘from time immemorial the Athens of India’.⁷² Significantly, Robertson insisted, the most learned of these Brahmins—those who devoted their lives to the rational ‘cultivation of science’—were monotheists. Here he drew largely from Charles Wilkins’ preface to his edition of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, while his views also echoed those of John Zephaniah Howell and Alexander Dow.⁷³ The Brahmins, he insisted, had a conception of the one Supreme Being, the benevolent creator and ruler of the universe, who was to be acknowledged and revered, and whose moral code for humankind was just and reasonable.⁷⁴ In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he maintained, ‘we find descriptions of the Supreme Being entitled to equal praise with those of the Greek philosophers’.⁷⁵ Robertson’s view of Brahmin religion was, to be sure, simplistic: he accepted the erroneous view of the early orientalists that Hinduism was a largely uniform religion, similar to Christianity, with an ecclesiastical hierarchy or clergy (the Brahmins), and a set of sacred texts.⁷⁶

Be that as it may, Robertson’s perception of monotheistic beliefs among the learned Brahmins left him with a problem. For when he turned his attention to the popular religious practices of the Indian people, they were far from representing a cultivated, uniform, rational monotheism. Rather, he discerned a vast array of diverse deities, temples, graven images, sacred sites, holy men, lurid rites and often

⁷⁰ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 288–9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 270–84.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 299.

⁷³ Marshall, *British Discovery of Hinduism*, 27, 39.

⁷⁴ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 319–20.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁷⁶ R. King, ‘Orientalism and the modern myth of “Hinduism”’, *Numen* 46 (1999) 146–85 at 166–79.

cruel ceremonies. He had to acknowledge the erotic, sexual aspects of Hindu religion, which no doubt offended his Edinburgh Presbyterian sensitivities. 'In no part of the earth', he wrote, 'was a connection between the gratification of sensual desire and the rites of public religion, displayed with more avowed indecency than in India'. He mentioned the lingam, but quickly added that it was 'too gross to be explained'.⁷⁷ His discussion of popular Hindu polytheism prompted him to offer a conjectural history of the rise of religion, in which he maintained that primitive peoples invented deities out of their own fears and desires, and that all early civilisations, including that of the ancient Greeks, were polytheistic. Monotheism, he maintained, came later, as civilisation advanced. In this account of Indian polytheism, he repeated the arguments of his own earlier conjectural history of religion in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans, which he had presented in Book IV of his *History of America* of 1777. His views here were profoundly influenced by David Hume's essay of 1757 on the 'Natural History of Religion'.⁷⁸ But despite this plausible argument concerning the origins of popular polytheism in India, Robertson was still left with a problem. Why, he asked, had the primitive Indian polytheism not declined under the progressive influence of enlightened Brahmin science and philosophy, including the influence of their monotheistic faith? 'What is received with implicit faith in ages of darkness', he observed, 'will excite contempt in an enlightened period'.⁷⁹ Brahmin monotheism, he believed, was also ancient. Why had Indian popular religion, which had emerged out of primitive fears in an 'age of darkness', not been transformed and elevated through the influence of India's enlightened class of Brahmins, who had come to social prominence so many centuries before?

The answer, for Robertson, lay in that familiar enemy of Enlightenment—priestcraft. The Brahmins perpetuated the excesses of polytheistic popular religion—which the best of them knew to be false—as a form of social control for the ignorant masses, as a system of rewards and punishments. 'Doomed by their condition', he wrote of the lower-caste Indians, 'to remain in ignorance, they were to be kept in order by delusion, and allured to do what is right, or deterred from venturing upon what is wrong, by the hope of those imaginary rewards which superstition promises, and the dread of those punishments which it threatens'.⁸⁰ The Brahmins, moreover, had a monopoly over the sacred and philosophical texts—including the rational, monotheistic

⁷⁷ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 312, 313.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 303–9; P. J. Marshall and G. Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 1982), 119–20. For Robertson's conjectural account of the rise of religion in the Americas, see W. Robertson, *The History of America*, 6th edn (1792), in Sher, Phillipson and Smitten (eds), *Works of William Robertson*, viii, 181–98. See also D. Hume, 'The Natural History of Religion', in D. Hume, *Four Dissertations* (London, 1757).

⁷⁹ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 316.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 328.

teachings found in those texts—which they withheld from the people. ‘They knew and approved what was true’, Robertson observed, ‘but among the rest of mankind they laboured to support and to perpetuate what is false’.⁸¹ With this sentence, Robertson suddenly ended his account of Indian religion. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with this picture of a society based on a popular religion in which capricious deities dispersed rewards and punishments—a religion of enthusiasm maintained by a clerical class who themselves held a moderate, ethical monotheistic faith. He was indeed coming very close to comparing the popular Hinduism of the masses in India with popular Christianity as it existed among the uneducated classes in much of Europe, including the popular Calvinism in Scotland, with its teachings of universal human depravity rooted in Adam’s original sin, a wrathful God, and the predestination of some souls to salvation and others to damnation. The discussion may well have been becoming too personal. Many had long suspected that Robertson himself was secretly Socinian or deist in his personal beliefs, even though he had steadfastly refused to countenance any calls for a revision of the strict Calvinist creed of the Westminster Confession of Faith (the standard of belief within the established Church of Scotland). If he did have doubts about the Calvinist system, had he not been acting throughout his ecclesiastical career very much like one of the learned Brahmins, when he insisted upon maintaining the Westminster Confession of Faith as vital to the established order in Church and State?

In any event, Robertson seemed to be inviting his European readers to reflect upon their own religion, and to recognise that the differences between European religion and that of India were not all that great—that both shared a distinction between what could be viewed as high theology (rational, moderate and tolerant) and popular religion (with tendencies to enthusiasm, superstition and fanaticism). In this, he echoed the view of many early orientalists. In emphasising the similarities of Hinduism and Christianity, orientalist thinkers often supported the notion that both religions had their basis in a ‘natural’ religion, which was rooted in a human nature that was common to all peoples and which was essentially monotheistic, rational and ethical.⁸²

Perhaps significantly, Robertson made no plea for the Christian conversion of India. On the contrary, he observed that Christian missionaries had made relatively few converts in India, and those only among the lowest castes, and he doubted that this would change.⁸³ Here he set himself against an emerging Protestant campaign in Britain, led by Church of England and Nonconformist Evangelicals, to open India to unrestricted Christian missionary activity. In 1792, the year after the publication of the *Disquisition*, Robertson’s fellow-Scot, the evangelical Charles Grant, a Company official in Bengal, wrote an

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁸² Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism*, 25.

⁸³ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 387–9.

influential memorandum entitled 'Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain', in which he rejected Robertson's favourable portrayal of Indian culture and society.⁸⁴ After surveying a catalogue of evils, including the degradation of lower-caste Indians, mistreatment of women, cruel forms of worship, pervasive dishonesty, Grant concluded that Indian society exhibited humanity 'in a very degraded and humiliated state' and that it needed to be Christianised.⁸⁵ At the renewal of the East India Company charter in 1793, Grant, along with the English Evangelical, William Wilberforce, and a number of others, sought to convince Parliament to add the so-called 'pious clause' to the charter, obliging the Company to promote and finance Christian education within the Indian territories under its control. The House of Commons passed the 'pious clause', and it was only defeated in the Lords when the Company marshalled its influence against it.⁸⁶ After 1793, the movement for the introduction of unrestricted Christian missions in India gained increasing support among the British Christian public. And as the movement grew in the next two decades, culminating in the opening of India to missions in 1813, Robertson's *Historical Disquisition*, with its critique of missions, became increasingly out of sympathy with British public opinion.⁸⁷

Conclusion

At the end of the Appendix, Robertson's larger purpose in the *Historical Disquisition* became clear. He closed by expressing the hope that his study of the ancient, sophisticated Indian civilisation might 'have some influence upon the behaviour of Europeans towards that people'. Too often, he observed, Europeans held up their own culture as a 'standard of perfection' and viewed other peoples 'with contempt'. In his *History of America*, he observed, he had charted the beginnings of European colonialism in Africa and America—where, 'in the pride of their superiority, Europeans thought themselves entitled to reduce the natives of the former [Africa] to slavery, and to exterminate those of the latter [America]'.⁸⁸ Now in India, he feared that Europeans were also coming to view the inhabitants of the subcontinent as 'an inferior race

⁸⁴ C. Grant, 'Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals, and on the Means of Improving It', *Parliamentary Papers* (Session 1812–23), vol. x, 1–112; A. T. Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India* (London, 1962), 141–51; Carnall, 'Robertson and contemporary images of India', 219–21.

⁸⁵ Cited in Embree, *Charles Grant*, 145.

⁸⁶ P. Carson, 'The British Raj and the awakening of the evangelical consciousness', in B. Stanley (ed.), *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), 45–70, at 54–6.

⁸⁷ In his celebrated Commons speech in June 1813 on opening India to missions, Wilberforce observed that 'even the excellent historian, Dr. Robertson' had fallen prey to the prevalent delusion of his generation concerning 'the impracticability of converting the natives of India'. But the British public now knew that Robertson had been 'misled' by a 'vain and groundless theory'. *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, xxvi (22 Jun. 1813), col. 839.

⁸⁸ Robertson, *Historical Disquisition*, 332.

of men' – an attitude that he had traced among the ancient Alexandrine Greeks – and he feared for the consequences. Robertson recalled that it was 'an impartial and candid inquiry' into Hindu civilisation that had convinced the Muslim emperor Akbar that the Hindu religion was 'no less entitled to protection and favour' than that of his Muslim subjects, and for this he had earned from the Indian people the honoured designation of 'The Guardian of Mankind'.⁸⁹ If Britain were to proceed in its course of conquest in India, he hoped that it might strive to earn a similar designation. In what would be one of his last published sentences, Robertson observed that if his study should contribute towards greater tolerance and understanding on the part of the British in India, 'I shall close my literary labours with the satisfaction of thinking that I have not lived or written in vain'.⁹⁰

Robertson sent copies of the *Historical Disquisition* to a number of politicians and literary figures, including Sir Henry Dundas, James Rennell, Lord Cornwallis (the governor of Bengal), Horace Walpole, and Edward Gibbon. The reception to the work in Britain was mixed. The book did find favour among officials of the East India Company, still very much under the influence of the early orientalisists. Henry Dundas assured him that his views were 'so much in accordance with my own, as to flatter me', and the Directors of the East India Company ordered thirty-six copies of the first edition for distribution in India.⁹¹ The long-term sales in general were very good; indeed, Richard Sher has ranked it among the top 13 per cent best selling works by eighteenth-century Scottish authors.⁹² None the less, Robertson complained in April 1792 that the initial sales were 'slower than I expected', and he was upset that Gibbon, to whom he had sent a copy, had not responded.⁹³ The reviewer in the *Monthly Review* was kindly, observing that the *Historical Disquisition* showed that Robertson's 'vigour, as an historian, has not forsaken him, and that he knows how to gild his subject with the rays of the setting sun'.⁹⁴ But the reviewer in the *Critical Review*, probably the Scottish classicist and historian, John Pinkerton, was far less generous. As well as criticising the structure of the work, he highlighted a number of factual errors and argued that the work lacked depth and a clear purpose. The *Disquisition*, he maintained, 'is too learned for popular readers, and too superficial for the learned'.⁹⁵ With

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁹¹ NLS, Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3944, fos 64–7, H. Dundas to W. Robertson, 27 Jun. 1791; Ms 3944, fol. 54, Court of Directors Order.

⁹² Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book*, 92.

⁹³ Duke University Library, William Robertson Papers, Ms 4512, W. Robertson to Andrew Strahan, 15 Apr. 1792. My thanks to Jeffrey Smitten for the information in this letter.

⁹⁴ 'Robertson's *Historical Disquisition concerning India*', *Monthly Review*, 2nd ser., 6 (Sep. 1791), 1–11, at 2.

⁹⁵ [John Pinkerton?], 'Robertson's *Historical Disquisition concerning India*', *Critical Review*, n.s., 3 (October 1791), 121–31, and (Appendix), 556–66, quotation at 565. The work is attributed to Pinkerton in J. Smitten, 'Bibliography of writings about William Robertson', in Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, 242.

assistance from Rennell, Playfair and others, Robertson completed a second, corrected and revised edition of the *Historical Disquisition* shortly before his death in June 1793. This second edition appeared in 1794, and it was followed by a number of re-printings.⁹⁶

The *Disquisition* found a favourable reception on the Continent. The work appeared in French and German translations in 1792, and it played a major role in introducing the fruits of the early British orientalist movement to European readers. For example, the French romantic, François René, vicomte de Chateaubriand, drew largely from the French version of Robertson's *Historical Disquisition* in his discussions of Indian literature and religion in the *Essai historique, politique et moral, sur les révolutions anciennes et modernes* of 1797 and later in his celebrated *Genie du Christianisme* of 1802. Writing in 1825, the French author, Joseph Daniel Guigniaut, observed that 'everyone' with an interest in India had read Robertson.⁹⁷ The work received serious attention from German scholars, including the respected historian, Arnold Herrmann Ludwig Heeren, while the German translation of the *Disquisition* was produced by the renowned German naturalist and ethnologist, Georg Forster.⁹⁸ It was in part through reading this translation of Robertson that the poet, critic and translator, August Wilhelm Schlegel, was inspired to learn Sanskrit.⁹⁹ Translations into Danish (1805) and Swedish (1819) followed. The initial phase of British orientalist scholarship drew to a close in the early decades of the nineteenth century, as Indian religion and culture came under the combined onslaught of evangelical Christianity and utilitarian philosophy. As it did so, the centre of gravity in Sanskrit scholarship passed to the German universities. Robertson's *Historical Disquisition* may well have played an important role in helping to inspire this orientalist interest in Germany.¹⁰⁰

Robertson's *Historical Disquisition* was not a great historical work. He did not know any Asian languages, and the research and writing were completed in a relatively short time. The work is very probably a fragment, the beginning of what might have been a larger history of the European presence in India, similar in scope to his history of America. Even as a fragment, there are defects. Like most of the British orientalists, he virtually ignored Islam in his discussion of Indian religion. His account of Indian civilisation was also overly laudatory, exaggerating the achievements of the Brahmins in astronomy and mathematics, and playing down the negative aspects of caste and the violence used to enforce the system. There was no account of *sati* (the

⁹⁶ NLS, Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3944, fos 68–71, 102–3, James Rennell to W. Robertson, 2 Jul. 1791, John Playfair to W. Robertson, 12 May 1792.

⁹⁷ R. Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880*, trans. by G. Patterson-Black and C. Reinking (New York, 1984), 61–2, 228.

⁹⁸ L. Kontler, 'William Robertson and his German audience on European and Non-European civilisations', *SHR* 80 (2001) 63–89, at 82–9.

⁹⁹ Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*, 61, 338.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 43–4.

ritual burning of widows), of human sacrifice, of infanticide, of the widespread slavery in India, or of the suffering of the lowest castes. As a history, the book is too polemical, too much of an apology for Indian civilisation. It is easy to see why those in Britain who were beginning the campaign to open India to unrestricted Christian mission activity would take little interest in Robertson's work. They could well argue that it was not necessary to defend such practices as the caste system or to extol the antiquity of India's civilisation in order to maintain that the people of the sub-continent were entitled to be protected from 'extermination' or 'enslavement', and that it would be possible to bring what they saw as the benefits of Christianity and Western philosophy to India without destroying what was positive in Indian culture.

Yet, while the spread of European dominion did not necessarily bring extermination or enslavement, Robertson the historian was aware that it too often did. He was convinced that the British and other European powers should content themselves with trade and not seek to transform India in line with their own religious faith or social values. He may have been naïve to believe that this was possible. The next century would show that Western commerce and industrialisation, combined with superior military power, brought the imposition of unequal trading relations upon Asia, unequal trading relations that were maintained by still more assertions of military power. There was also a growing tendency for British administrators, under evangelical or utilitarian influence, to seek to direct and change Indian society. None the less, there was something attractive in Robertson's effort to spare India the horrors that had been inflicted on the peoples of the Caribbean, Mexico or Peru. In the words of Samuel Martin, the Church of Scotland minister of Monimail, who celebrated Robertson's last work in verse:

The Aim is great, to bear the slightest Part
In spreading Liberality of Heart,
In checking Insolence, and to diffuse
Just Sentiments, and philanthropic Views;
To curb the lust of Power, the Lust of Gain;
Superior Force or Knowledge to restrain;
...
To render Mankind blest—the Praise be thine;
Tis more than noble, Sir, it is divine.¹⁰¹

There was indeed something admirable in this effort by an aging Enlightenment historian to write a history that would shed positive light on Asian civilisations, proclaim the essential unity of humankind and challenge the advance of imperialism.

¹⁰¹ NLS, Robertson-MacDonald Papers, Ms 3944, fos 94–101, Samuel Martin to W. Robertson, 11 Apr. 1792.