

# INTRODUCTION

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The writings of Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) offer insights into history, society and politics, challenging us to reconsider our conceptions of human nature and to reflect more deeply than we otherwise might on the moral demands of modernity. Renowned for his masterwork, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Ferguson is also the author of political pamphlets, treatises of moral and political theory, a history of the Roman Republic and, late in life, numerous unfinished essays. Influenced by the Stoics and by Montesquieu, among others, he was in steady engagement with (and was sometimes critical of) contemporaries such as David Hume, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid. Not a formulaic thinker, Ferguson seeks to defend and articulate the institutions of liberty, while nonetheless reminding us of the call to lead good, rather than merely pleasurable, lives.

Ferguson's works, spanning several decades, exhibit a general consistency of outlook. He rejects the claims and assumptions of social contract theory and argues instead for man's immersion in history. He accepts our natural sociality but recognizes that we are also prone to conflict and opposition (and that these qualities help ensure progress). Though he embraces ideas of liberalism, he nonetheless worries over some of its moral consequences. He adheres to Stoic and teleological perspectives on human nature and moral goodness, and he espouses a theory of objective moral judgement that also grants a place for ethical sentiment. And though he suggests that the institutions and patterns of society may emerge in an unintended fashion, he defends vigorous political participation and moral leadership.

Despite Ferguson's sometimes difficult writing style, its content conveys a sense of ease and congeniality, perhaps because his originality has the familiarity of genuine insight. For example, he describes us as animal and rational, ambitious and indolent, competitive and social; we are prone to habit yet obliged to maintain moral vigour. Thus does Ferguson – no reductionist he – recall the complexity of human nature, how it manifests countervailing tendencies. Such plural and varying dispositions may balance each other, but they also demand

the individual's moral guidance and energy. We are, after all, creatures whose natural end is to live in liberty and for whom despotism is a continual threat. In sum, Ferguson is a modern thinker, not wholly comfortable with modernity. At one point in his *Essay* (II.iii) he remarks how 'We are generally at a loss to conceive how mankind can subsist under customs and manners extremely different from our own ... But every age hath its consolations, as well as its sufferings.' Such a conclusion reflects the character of Ferguson's thought. An evaluation and assessment of a nation or period must weigh the varying goods of life, the plural character of our dispositions, and the possibilities of circumstance.

During the eighteenth century, Ferguson's works were widely known and translated. Over the course of time, his fame has receded somewhat, but his books, pamphlets and essays still fascinate. It is not altogether surprising, then, that an increasing number of scholars have come to recognize his significance, as manifested by scholarly essays, by a new edition of his *Essay*, and by the publication of both his letters (*The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson*) and, more recently, his papers (*The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson*). Given the growing interest in his thought, it is surprising and lamentable that there is no collection of scholarly essays devoted to this thinker. Two tandem volumes seek to remedy this lacuna. Reflecting Ferguson's breadth of interests, the essays collected here (and in a second volume, entitled *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society*) are authored by historians, philosophers, sociologists and political scientists. This first volume takes up topics relating to the intersection of Ferguson's life and work, his political and diplomatic activity, his understanding of history, and his perspectives on human nature, action and progress. The second volume focuses on Ferguson the philosopher, moralist, and political theorist, taking into account his critiques of the moral thought of David Hume and Adam Smith, as well as the complex and varying interpretations of his political, social and moral theories. Each essay, original to the volume, seeks to re-evaluate an idea, theme or argument, or to reassess Ferguson's relations to other important thinkers. As a whole, the essays range over all of his major works, as well as his pamphlets, unpublished essays and lecture notes.

## Life and Works

Born in Perthshire, on the edge of the Highlands, Adam Ferguson studied divinity, became a chaplain to the Black Watch Regiment and later secured a professorial chair at Edinburgh University. Engaged in the political life of his nation and immersed in the social and intellectual circles of Edinburgh, Ferguson has long been regarded as a thinker whose Scottish identity must be germane to his writing (and, thus, to our understanding of his thought). In the opening essay of this volume, 'Ferguson's Epistolary Self', John D. Brewer challenges this interpretation. Drawing from Ferguson's letters, Brewer argues that Ferguson

makes no connection in his correspondence between his identity as a Scot and his intellectual work. Brewer suggests that Ferguson's work is mediated through his private self, a self that does not, in fact, reveal a Highland identity. Brewer concludes that Ferguson was striving to advance knowledge in general and not the particular perspectives of Scotland.

From a divergent vantage point, David Allan contends in 'Ferguson and Scottish History: Past and Present in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*' that even though Scotland does not figure explicitly in the *Essay*, that absence does not show that Ferguson was uninterested in the land of his birth. Indeed, Ferguson's *Essay* was part of a distinct Scottish historiographical tradition. Although that work offers reflections derived from events and changes in eighteenth-century Scotland, it is also part of a European debate on the nature of society; thus, Ferguson aims to avoid a Scottish perspective that would render his analyses less than general.

In canvassing some of the Scottish historical texts within Ferguson's ken, Allan illuminates some of the intellectual (and cultural and experiential) influences on Ferguson's work. However, it is no easy task to trace the particular books that might have influenced Ferguson's varied and broad perspectives. As Jane B. Fagg points out in her essay, 'Ferguson's Use of the Edinburgh University Library: 1764–1806', there exists scant information about his personal library. Nonetheless, it is possible to reconstruct Ferguson's borrowings from the university library. Interweaving an account of his life and works, Fagg charts the 42-year period in which Ferguson borrowed 272 books from the library. She notes the breadth of his borrowing, including the great quantity of works on Roman history and classical sources more generally.

### Ferguson in History

Some of Adam Ferguson's library visits were undertaken with an eye to preparing his classroom lectures. As a professor, he aimed to educate within a moral framework that stipulated the necessity of vigorous and virtuous political participation. Political activity should not be the preserve of specialists or experts but the concern of all citizens. In his essay, 'Ferguson's *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia*', David Raynor offers a reconsideration of Ferguson's argument for a citizens' militia. In his pamphlet of 1756, the Scot contends that the manners necessary for the members of a militia are born not from military training or discipline but from the traditional use and knowledge of arms. A militia is not, therefore, a training ground for virtue but an institution that presupposes it. In this sense, Ferguson advocates a small and voluntary militia restricted to men of virtue and honour.

Ferguson took an active interest in two of the defining events of the late eighteenth century. In 'Ferguson's Views on the American and French Revolutions',

Yasuo Amoh delineates Ferguson's arguments against Richard Price, an advocate for the colonies, and chronicles his work with the Carlisle Commission, dispatched in 1778 to seek reconciliation with the Americans. Amoh describes how Ferguson's regret at the loss of the colonies reveals, among other concerns, some mercantilist assumptions. In the case of the French Revolution, Ferguson is less the agent than the observer. Despite his hope that the 'new Republick' would ensure peace, he also feared a social revolution and, having lived long enough to witness the rise of Napoleon, came to worry about the threat that France posed to other nations.

Ferguson's engagement with the Carlisle Commission had given him a practical education that supplemented his worries – evident in his animadversions about the American Revolution – about trade, political expansion and the military. In 'Political Education for Empire and Revolution', David Kettler reviews Ferguson's lecture notes of 1775–85 with an eye to how these notes offer students a political education on the topics of empire, expansion and despotism, not to mention the pragmatics of constitutional change. Kettler suggests that Ferguson came to believe that the despotic elements of empire might be controlled, and that even in the midst of drastic constitutional change, practical compromises and political bargaining would remain necessary.

### Ferguson on History

A recognition that we are situated within history, that we are creatures of circumstance and nature, is a crucial characteristic of modernity. As a historian, Ferguson was never concerned solely with a chronology of events or facts. For him, history is not one element of human experience; rather, human experience is within history. History reveals the dispositions of human nature. And natural history shows how humanity develops out of the crucible of nature, circumstance and institution. In the first part of *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Ferguson employs history – including the historical literature of and about the ancients, as well as reports submitted by modern travellers – to understand and to illustrate human nature. In other instances, he employs history to reveal patterns, shifts and changes that constitute progress or decline. Just as Montesquieu sought to locate the various causes of distinct modes of governing, Ferguson recognizes that the events of history cannot be encapsulated in a single agent's intention or some moment of explicit agreement. Thus the task of historiography, both in its narrative form (as in his history of the Roman Republic) and as natural history (as in his *Essay*) remains that of providing explanatory narrations. However, Ferguson never abandons prescriptive or didactic insights into the nature of government, the relevance of virtue or the threat of political and moral lassitude.

In 'Ferguson, Roman History and the Threat of Military Government in Modern Europe', Iain McDaniel notes how Rome's progression to empire had

often been invoked, in the eighteenth century, to raise the spectre of military government. In contradistinction to Montesquieu, Ferguson contends, for example, that military and political functions should not be separated and that liberty prevails only if the spirit of the nation remains vigorous. A military dominated by the lower ranks of society could result in the usurpation of political power by demagogues, not to mention international conquest and military empire. Ferguson defends Rome's constitution and argues that Britain's military and political system, suitably reformed along the lines of the early Roman Republic, should include a citizens' militia and the union of civic and military functions. Having examined the damage to the Republic from the strains of empire, Ferguson concludes that, for modern societies, the risks of despotism arise less from monarchy than from a military dominated by the populace at large.

Ferguson also adumbrates methodological considerations on the writing of history. In 'Ferguson's "Appropriate Stile" in Combining History and Science: The History of Historiography Revisited,' Annette Meyer contends that his conception of history rests between two distinct historiographical traditions, a German-dominated and theoretical understanding of historiography and a more empiricist and Anglo-American tradition. As a result, Ferguson's methodological contributions have been slighted. In revisiting his conception of history, Meyer explains how, in moving beyond David Hume's understanding of the 'science of man,' Ferguson unites an empirical understanding of historiography with a more philosophical one. In so doing, he approaches the hermeneutic understanding developed by nineteenth-century historians and thinkers and sets forth a new object of historical research – mankind.

### Human Nature, Action and Progress

Vigorous action has a singular importance for Ferguson. The human being is a restless creature, working to improve his circumstances, altering or modifying some feature of the landscape, or engaging in adventure or play. In 'Ferguson's Politics of Action,' Fania Oz-Salzberger takes up Ferguson's belief that the human being is fully realized only in activity and exertion. Such a claim, she notes, is typically utilized with men in mind: their active and masculine natures are best cultivated and realized in civic and political life. Indeed, Ferguson understands his own account of politics to express the perspective of a participant rather than an observer. Since political freedom is a product of activity – thus does Ferguson employ the language of political virtue – politics is not to be reduced, as David Hume suggested, to a science.

In 'Ferguson and the Active Genius of Mankind,' Craig Smith describes how the concept of action is, for Ferguson, both a description of an essential aspect of humanity and the basis of a standard of moral excellence. However, our actions often

generate unintended consequences. In what sense, then, are we morally responsible for these unintended outcomes? According to Smith, Ferguson deploys the idea of the 'nation' to suggest that moral responsibility for the unintended accrues at the corporate rather than the individual level. National spirit may go into decline as we dissipate ourselves in pleasure or amusement, perhaps leading to corruption as we pursue luxury to the detriment of the serious business of life.

Human activity, appropriately guided, helps to secure progress. That we have the capacity to progress is a given for Ferguson and emblematic of Enlightenment thought. For him, progress, as opposed to mere change, should be understood not in terms of material wealth but as the moral, if not spiritual, capital of individuals. Many scholars take Ferguson's theory of society to be a secular theory, in which the development of the individual or the group is unrelated to anything outside of history. Indeed, in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* there is very little discussion of religion – even less, perhaps, than of his native Scotland! However, as Jeng-Guo S. Chen explains in 'Providence and Progress: The Religious Dimension in Ferguson's Discussion of Civil Society', the former divinity student embeds his account of progress and civil society within a providentialist understanding of the universe. After describing Ferguson's religious moderation, Chen discerns his use of a two-fold account of history, according to which a providential God ensures that, despite the travails of particular individuals or nations, there is an ongoing and universal progress. The thesis of universal progress, as Chen elucidates, owes much to Ferguson's teacher, William Cleghorn. And although God ensures that progress will occur, Ferguson maintains that individuals remain responsible for their individual fates and those of their particular nations.

The reader will find, in these essays, new and interesting considerations of a thinker too often neglected. Adam Ferguson's texts not only provide insights into the events and debates of the eighteenth century but they delineate ideas that resonate still. Ferguson's rich learning, his varied interests and his moral seriousness well justify a reassessment and a renewed appreciation of the uniqueness and fecundity of his works.

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