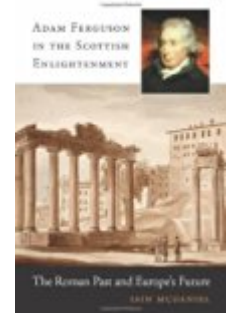


Iain McDaniel. *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 288 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-07296-1.



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Adam Ferguson was something of an anomaly among his enlightened peers in eighteenth-century Edinburgh. Coming from Perthshire and speaking Gaelic meant that he was almost a Highlander, and through his mother he had aristocratic connections. While he followed his father into the ministry of the Church of Scotland, his only parishioners were the soldiers of the Black Watch, the regiment he joined as deputy chaplain in 1745 and with whom he saw active service for nine years. No other member of the Scottish enlightened brotherhood could claim such a background, so it is not surprising that Ferguson's intellectual perceptions also differed from theirs in significant ways.

When he arrived in Edinburgh in the 1750s to take up a literary career, Ferguson threw himself into the social activities of the men with whom he had become friendly at university a decade earlier, becoming a leader in the demands for a Scottish militia. His arguments in favor of militias rather than standing armies can be seen as the foundation for many of his later philosophical

views. He called for "some wise and deep laid Establishment," which was needed to provide national security in a dangerous Europe, and whose details he carefully described.[1] This militia was to be led by the aristocracy and gentry of the nation, and the men would be citizens of standing (although Ferguson did suggest that poachers would be possible material for militias!), numbers of whom would serve in rotation. His *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (1756) makes the case for a military nobility, whose status would be high, and whose virtue would support both the state itself and the liberty of its citizens.

His *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, written a decade later, continued to stress the importance of the distinction of ranks and of military virtue. For Ferguson, excessive equality and democracy were the triggers for the transition to an imperial regime in which liberty would be lost. The history of the fall of the Roman Republic could be used as an example for the risks that eighteenth-century Europe ran with its current

“pacific commercial monarchies” (p. 4). Ferguson’s 1783 *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* gave further consideration to the specifics of the transition to imperial rule, and points to his continued concern about this fate occurring in his own day.

Iain McDaniel’s book, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe’s Future*, fills a gap in the literature of enlightened thought, presenting a fresh glimpse into the depth of the discussion about history and politics. But its title raises a question: Ferguson the man is largely missing, and the Scottish Enlightenment is likewise hiding in the background. The second part of the title is much more descriptive of the contents of the book, which is a detailed scrutiny of eighteenth-century writings on the modern commercial state and on the dangers that it might pose to liberty. Ferguson’s role is to act as the point of comparison against which the other enlightened authors can be considered. His ambivalence about ideas of liberty and equality, seen as keystones of the British constitution by most Whigs, and about the dangers of militarism on the one hand and the importance of noble martial leadership on the other, are seldom connected to his early close relationship with the Highlanders of the Black Watch and their clan background.

McDaniel sets out to document Ferguson’s place in the political literature of the Enlightenment, and particularly his hesitation about the prosperous progress of commercial regimes. His book begins with an investigation of Montesquieu’s influence on Ferguson, such as an emphasis on the possibility of military government, the belief that republics were not necessarily free states, and the importance of the nature of the early Germanic monarchies. Scots debated many of Montesquieu’s ideas in the period of the Seven Years’ War. McDaniel reviews this debate, situating Ferguson into its context. The “vulnerability of the British constitution” was based on the security provided by its excellent laws (p. 57), which left

its citizens too lethargic to be motivated to preserve liberty, which was threatened by the equality demanded by populist politicians. The debate around Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* (written in 1754 and published in 1755) represented a second influence on Ferguson’s thought. Denying Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville’s interpretation of human motivation, Ferguson’s moral philosophy followed Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson, but he again looked to the Germanic states and their military leadership as producing a “principle of internal cohesion” (pp. 87-88).

The modern commercial state, however, presented new challenges to stability. Although commerce was not necessarily wrong or misguided, it could have the effect of dividing the civilian and military parts of government, leading to a loss of interest in martial affairs, and hence a loss of the ordinary citizen’s ability to defend himself or his state. Moreover, commercial interests demanded territorial expansion, and increased militarization, which was dangerous to liberty. Here McDaniel contrasts Ferguson with a variety of French philosophes, such as Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Guillaume Thomas Raynal, and Denis Diderot, but also going back to the views of Andrew Fletcher at the beginning of the century.

The fall of the Roman Republic represented a moral lesson for students of history, and could be seen as a mirror for understanding contemporary politics. McDaniel discusses the debate on power and authority by British writers from the 1720s, again giving the context for Ferguson’s views. The early villains in Ferguson’s Roman tragedy were the Gracchi brothers and their misguided agrarian laws. Subordination was necessary, so division of land and wealth naturally went along with that. Upsetting the equilibrium was dangerous to the constitution. Conquest simply made the situation more precarious. For McDaniel, the latter part of the *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* should be seen as a warning

about the British state degenerating into a military empire, and hence as a call to arms for Ferguson's contemporaries to reinvigorate the aristocracy to their traditional positions of leadership. This call took Ferguson back to the question of the militia and a reconnection between the civil and military departments of state. Public service was essential to prevent the enervation of the elite in a wealthy commercial society. Virtue and martial valor must become the basis for rank, not merely birth or wealth.

The American Revolution seemed to confirm the danger of large republics. Scottish writers dwelled on the risks the example of the new state represented to the stability of Europe. McDaniel provides a summary of the arguments of various Scots on the political issues presented by republican revolutions. Ferguson and most of his friends opposed the American Revolution, and he himself served on a fruitless commission to negotiate with the Americans in 1778. Nevertheless, toward the end of his life, he saw great promise in the early stages of the French Revolution. Within a few years, however, his presentiments about excessive liberty and equality leading to military dictatorship were fulfilled. Napoleon Bonaparte represented the new Augustus, the "republican emperor" leading Europe into slavery (p. 218), and proving that large republics become corrupt and produce despotism.

Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment paints a valuable picture about the varieties of ways in which the history of Rome influenced eighteenth-century thought about the rise of the modern commercial state, offering a serious comparative approach to the clash of ideas on this issue, using a broad variety of contemporary sources. The reader will not, however, learn much about the character of Adam Ferguson, nor about his position in the Scottish Enlightenment.

Note

[1]. Adam Ferguson, *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1756), 3.

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