

Review Article: Hume and Smith Studies after Forbes and Trevor-Roper¹

Max Skjönsberg, St Andrews

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Berry C (2018) *Essays on Hume, Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rasmussen D (2017) *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Abstract:

The ‘Scottish Enlightenment’ has fostered a steadily growing academic industry since Duncan Forbes of Cambridge and Hugh Trevor-Roper of Oxford put the subject on the map in the 1960s. David Hume and Adam Smith have from the start been widely considered as its leading thinkers, and their thoughts on politics have attracted an increasing amount of attention in recent years. Two new publications invite readers to reflect on the state of the art in Scottish Enlightenment studies in general and especially Hume and Smith scholarship. Christopher Berry’s *Essays on Hume, Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment* collects many of Berry’s pathbreaking essays from a career spanning over forty years. *The Infidel and the Professor* by Dennis Rasmussen is astonishingly the first book-length treatment of the private and philosophical friendship between Hume and Smith. Both publications reflect how much Scottish Enlightenment studies have expanded since the 1960s, and the sustained interest in Hume and Smith to boot. At the same time, they also raise questions about the future of the field and what remains to be done.

¹ I attended a panel session on Rasmussen’s book at the 45th International Hume Society Conference in Budapest, Hungary, in July 2018. I benefited greatly from the talks from the panellists (Rasmussen, Michael Gill, and John Scott) as well as the subsequent discussion. I would also like to thank Janet Chan, Robin Douglass, Tim Hochstrasser, and Robert Jubb.

I

With five universities compared with England's two in the eighteenth century, contemporaries were struck by how the Scots in intellectual endeavours excelled their richer neighbours south of the border. In 1776, the English historian Edward Gibbon wrote to the Edinburgh professor Adam Ferguson that 'I have always looked up with the most sincere respect towards the northern parts of our island, whither taste and philosophy seemed to have retired from the smoke and hurry of this immense capital [i.e. London].' (Merolle ed., 1995: 2:138). David Hume (1711-76) took pride in the literary achievements of his native land, writing to a friend in 1757 that 'it is really admirable how many Men of Genius this Country produces at present...is it not strange, I say, that...we shou'd really be the People most distinguish'd for Literature in Europe?' (Greig ed., 1932: 1:255). The term 'Scottish Enlightenment' was coined in 1900 to describe the intellectual achievements of the eighteenth-century Scots (Sher 1985: 4). It was in the 1960s, however, when it came to the fore thanks to the independent efforts of Duncan Forbes at Cambridge and Hugh Trevor-Roper at Oxford. Since then, the field has fostered a steadily growing academic industry.

Hume and his younger friend Adam Smith (1723-90) are today widely seen as the two leading lights of the Scottish Enlightenment. Both Forbes (1954, 1975a and 1975b) and Trevor-Roper (2010: 17-33) put them at the heart of their enquiries. While Hume remains most famous as a philosopher and Smith as an economist, they were quintessential eighteenth-century 'men of letters' who wrote on a range of topics, including politics. Unlike figures such as Lord Kames, Ferguson, John Millar, and Dugald Stewart, who are predominantly studied by historians,² both Hume and Smith have received an increasing amount of attention from political theorists in recent years. Hume's politics has recently inspired research related to the Anglo-American Realist strand in political theory (Whelan 2004; Sabl 2012). Smith's politics has proven to be a tougher nut to crack since he, unlike Hume, did not write essays specifically devoted to political questions in a conventional sense (even though much of what he wrote was related to politics). Since *Adam Smith's Politics* (1978) by the recently deceased Donald Winch (1935-2017),³ however, more scholars have ventured into this area.⁴

² Ferguson is a partial exception; see, for example, Kalyvas and Katznelson (2008: ch. 3).

³ In the words of Berry, Winch, inspired by Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock's 'contextual' approach to the history of political thought, 'sought to rescue "Smith" from anachronistic interpretations as some sort of harbinger of the "Chicago School"' (Berry 2018: 12).

⁴ See most recently Sagar (2018: chs. 5 and 6).

Christopher Berry and Dennis Rasmussen are two of the most prolific political theorists currently working on Hume and Smith. Berry, Emeritus Professor at Glasgow University, is a long-standing Scottish Enlightenment scholar who has written about the topic for more than forty years. His latest publication is a collection of many of his trailblazing essays and three entirely new ones. Rasmussen of Tufts University, Massachusetts, a few generations younger, has emerged as a productive contributor to Enlightenment studies in the past decade. His new book is a well-presented exposition of the friendship between Hume and Smith, astonishingly the first book exclusively devoted to that subject. Both publications invite the reader to reflect on the state of the art in Scottish Enlightenment studies in general and Hume and Smith scholarship in particular.

II

With his own distinctive voice, Berry's research covers much of the same ground as the late Istvan Hont (1947-2013), including questions of luxury, sociability and commercial society. Much of their common interests may be explained by the agenda set in the 1970s by J. G. A. Pocock (1975), Albert Hirschman (1977), and, of course, Forbes (1975a), along with their shared knowledge of Marx. Despite this, they are very different scholars. Hont was a conviction writer and eager to make grand claims, crucially that modern political thought begins with Hume and Smith and it is to them rather than to Machiavelli or Marx we need to turn in order to think more constructively about our politics, i.e. the politics of the nation state driven by jealousy of trade (Hont, 2005: introduction). By contrast, Berry describes himself as reluctant to develop a unifying 'big idea' and willing to go wherever the evidence leads him, even though others may be more ready to refer to his treatment of the Scots as non-positivist 'social scientists' (followers of Bacon and Newton) as belonging under the 'big idea' heading (Berry 2018: 23-25, 124-41). Berry has published several books, including *The Idea of Luxury* (1994), *The Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (1997), *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (2013), all of which have Hume and Smith at their centre. Like Forbes, Berry combines expertise of the Scottish Enlightenment with Hegel scholarship; indeed, his first book was called *Hume, Hegel and Human Nature* (1982). Even if Berry is careful to stress that he is not a historian, his approach is contextual and it is his hallmark to locate his subjects firmly in their intellectual milieus.

His new essay collection is a superb reflection of his life's work, with roughly two-thirds of the twenty one-essay volume being devoted to Hume and Smith. Many of the

remaining essays are about the much lesser known James Dunbar, a lecturer in moral philosophy at King's College, Aberdeen, in the eighteenth century.⁵ The entire collection is prefaced by an autobiographical introduction, and a brief postscript with commentary has been added to each essay. There is plenty of self-citation throughout, perhaps too much for some readers, but it is understandable considering the format and occasion of the publication: it is intended as a summary of his career. We learn from the introduction that his PhD proposal was simply on the question of whether there was a Scottish version of Enlightenment. Despite being advised that Forbes at Cambridge was 'the man' at the time (Berry 2018: 2), he started his PhD under Donald MacRae and Ken Minogue at the London School of Economics in 1967. Dunbar became the main focus of the PhD, which was eventually examined by Forbes (Berry 2018: 5).

One of Berry's major overarching arguments is that the Scottish 'social scientists' effected a shift away from 'the political', not properly to 'the economic' but to the more wide-ranging category of 'the social' (2018: 31, 110, 130, 138, *passim*). This does not mean that the volume lacks essays with relevance for political theory (Berry's own discipline broadly defined). Of particular political interest are the essays on Hume and conservatism, and Smith and liberty. The question of Hume's and Smith's ideological allegiances should remain a live one, even though the old notion that Hume was a Tory and Smith a Whig has long been exploded by Forbes's 'sceptical Whig' thesis (Forbes, 1975b). Forbes's argument has been very influential, and it may be the closest we can come to describing the politics of Hume and Smith in one term. There is something dissatisfying, however, about attempting to label people who were extremely reluctant to label themselves. The only time Hume called himself a sceptical Whig was in a very local context when referring to the conclusion to his essay 'Of the Protestant Succession', an essay which contained so many concessions to the Jacobite camp, i.e. the opposite side, that his friends advised him not to publish it (Greig ed., 1932: 1:111).

There are passages in Hume's writings which, especially when taken out of context, can appeal to modern self-professed conservatives.⁶ However, a great deal of scholars are understandably eager to shield Hume from 'charges' of conservatism. Andrew Sabl, for instance, writes that it should be disputed whether Hume can even be called a conservative in matters of constitutional theory since he was not completely hostile to constitutional change

⁵ The key treatments of Dunbar include Emerson (1992), Wood (1993), Allan (1993), Berry (1997), and Sebastiani (2013).

⁶ The most influential case for Hume as a conservative remains Livingston (1984). For recent discussion, see Harris (2018).

(2012: 1). Sabl's broad point is a sound one: if preoccupation with political stability in a time dominated by the memories and legacies of the European wars of religion makes someone a conservative, it is hard to think of any eighteenth-century thinker to whom that label could not be applied. Berry may appear to have skin in this game since he has published a monograph on *David Hume* (2009) in a series on 'Modern Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers' (Bloomsbury). However, while not wishing 'to deny what might be called a Humean contribution to the development of conservative thinking' (2018: 260), Berry's portrayal of Hume is historically sensitive, and he rightly points out that Hume can only be *attributed* the 'conservative' label since he could not have self-identified as such. Historically speaking, there was no nominal conservative ideology or party until the 19th century (see Bourke 2018). Crucially, he also argues that such an attribution would 'at least be insecure and at most a distortion.' (2018: 247).

Berry's key interlocutor in his treatment of conservatism is Michael Oakeshott, whose graduate seminar in political thought Berry attended at the LSE.⁷ Oakeshott attempted to trace over time the existence of a 'conservative disposition' in opposition to extreme rationalism, and he believed that Hume has much to teach us in this area (Oakeshott 1991: 435). While agreeing with the interpretation of Hume as a sceptical thinker who rejected extreme rationalism (which Berry associates with Descartes) and favoured political stability, Berry seeks to question any suggestion that this (mitigated) scepticism necessarily leads to veneration of tradition. For him, Hume is certainly no relativist for whom customs are good simply by virtue of being long-established. Rather, customs can be either positive or negative depending on their character and effects, with the key example of a bad custom being 'superstition' (2018: 254-60). Leaning on a strong universalist interpretation of human nature (2018: 146-62), fasting and polygamy may be intelligible in specific contexts, but they are always deemed 'odious' by Hume. Moreover, by pointing to Hume's commitment to questions such as toleration and free trade, Berry further argues that 'there is enough evidence of his commitment to its basic ideas to warrant the label "liberal" to be affixed to his thought' (2018: 260). Acutely aware that liberalism is a nineteenth-century ideology, however, the stronger part of Berry's essay is his critique of the usefulness of these later political creeds when describing eighteenth-century political thought.

⁷ Berry (2018: 7) makes an interesting speculation about the potential influence of Oakeshott on Forbes. Oakeshott edited *The Cambridge Journal*, where Forbes published his first piece on Scottish intellectual history (1954).

Also of interest from the perspective of political thought is Berry's essay titled 'Smith on Liberty "in our present sense of the word"'. The quotation in the title is from book three of the *Wealth of Nations*, and it shows Smith's sensitivity that liberty can have more than one meaning, and that the difference is not only conceptual but also temporal (Berry, 2018: 386). Modern liberty, for Smith, is related to opulence, secured by the rule of law. Greater general opulence in commercial society produces economic inequality, but also significantly less dependence and more new important freedoms, including the ability to change one's occupation (see also 2018: 326-46). Skilfully (if not very surprisingly), Berry argues that Smith viewed this kind of liberty as superior, not only to slave-owning ancient republics, but crucially also to the self-governing city states of late mediaeval and early-modern Europe (where modern liberty in the sense of 'order and good government' in fact originated). The drawback of such city-states, located particularly in what today is Italy and Switzerland, was that they often resorted to sumptuary legislation, i.e. laws to regulate property and consumption, as part of moral outrage against luxury and as a way to control status differentials (2018: 389). For instance, even in the eighteenth century, the inhabitants of the republic of Geneva were divided into strict orders with concomitant rules about which profession could be pursued. Berry argues that Smith's censure of such laws make him an egalitarian as well as a quintessentially 'modern' thinker (on this, see also Fleischacker 2013).⁸ It is true that Smith was a theorist of 'ranks' and described in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* how the rich set the trends of fashion, but this in turn leads to a chain of emulation upsetting the defined hierarchy which sumptuary laws tried to uphold (Berry 2018: 390). Besides, opulence depend on extensive division of labour, which would be prevented by sumptuary restrictions.⁹ In contrast with his essay on Hume and conservatism, in this essay Berry completely avoids the loaded L-word, i.e. liberalism (but he writes in the postscript that the idea of the essay originated from a lecture he gave on liberalism in 1996 (2018: 400)). In a separate essay (2018: 361), as well as in other publications (2010), Berry refers to Smith as a 'mundane liberal'.

III

⁸ Note that on questions of forms of government, largely eschewed by Berry, Smith was certainly no egalitarian but essentially a proponent of government of estates, see Winch (1996: 166-75).

⁹ As Smith scholars (Berry and Rasmussen inclusive, but the latter more than the former) are ever keen to stress, however, Smith did point out many of the drawbacks of the division of labour, crucially that it makes workers 'as stupid and ignorant as is possible for a human creature to become' (Smith 1976: 782).

Dennis Rasmussen's new book is his latest in a series on eighteenth-century political thought. He has previously written about Rousseau, Smith and commercial society (2008),¹⁰ and Hume, Smith, Voltaire, and Montesquieu as the Enlightenment pragmatists (2013). In his new book he has confined himself to Scotland and written a rather touching chronicle about the close friendship between Hume and Smith. This relationship was both personal as well as philosophical, and Rasmussen does justice to both aspects. It is an accessibly written book which is intended and suitable for a broader readership and more specialised academics, even if the primary target audience is probably the former. One of its virtues is that, with precision and accuracy, it places Hume and Smith in their immediate context: in a Scotland dominated by religious life and more specifically the fairly austere Presbyterian Kirk. Key complementary studies here are Ahnert (2014), McIntosh (1998), and Sher (1985).

The genre of philosophical and literary friendship is a tried and tested one in intellectual history. Brean Hammond's book about Pope and Bolingbroke (1984) comes immediately to mind. The closest we have of a dual biographical treatment of Hume and Smith before Rasmussen's new work is a Smith biography (2010) written by the late Nicholas Phillipson (1937-2018), one of the leading Scottish Enlightenment historians of his generation.¹¹ The approach of Phillipson, taught by Forbes at Cambridge in the early 1960s (together with other luminaries such as Quentin Skinner and John Dunn), was to combine intellectual, political and social history, without reducing them to each other (see Kidd 2014). Since Phillipson had already written about Hume (in 1989), the most interesting aspect of his Smith biography was the personal and intellectual relationship between the two thinkers. For those familiar with Phillipson's work, and indeed with Hume's and Smith's published correspondence, much of the material in Rasmussen's book will be familiar.

This is not to say that Rasmussen's new book is superfluous. He shows an impressive mastery of particularly the existing correspondence, some of which he has studied in manuscript (see, e.g., 2017: 141). In addition, considering Hume and Smith in tandem enables Rasmussen to show how Smith's economic theories are more indebted to Hume than many economists might have suspected (Rasmussen 2017: esp. chs. 3 and 9). This will not come as a surprise to those familiar with Scottish Enlightenment studies, one hopes that it can help pave the way for a broader re-evaluation of Hume's contribution to political economy.¹² Rasmussen also makes a strong case for the ingenuity of Smith's moral and political

¹⁰ On Smith and Rousseau, see also Berry (2018: 326-46, based on a 1989 essay); Hanley (2008), Griswold (2010 and 2018), and Hont (2015).

¹¹ There are also essay-length treatments of the topic, including Ross (2007).

¹² See Schabas and Wennerlind eds., (2008).

philosophy, which, though indebted to Hume in many areas and almost always taking his older friend's thought as his starting points, sought actively to go beyond Hume (Rasmussen 2017: esp. ch. 5). In this respect, Rasmussen revises Phillipson's description of Smith as 'a perfect Humean', and his approach is closer to Samuel Fleischacker's (Rasmussen 2017: 11-12). A key example of Smith's revision of Hume is the question of justice. Hume is notorious for having said that justice is an artificial virtue. Rather than being a natural instinct or innate sense, he explained the development of justice by referring to the principle of utility, i.e. through practice and experience of what is useful rather than any natural instinct. *Naturally* we are more likely to favour ourselves and our loved ones, which is why we need government to administer justice in a precise and indiscriminating manner. Once justice is in place, it depends on habit rather than utility-calculations.¹³ Smith agreed about the usefulness of justice, but when he explained how justice arises and how we relate to it, he argued against Hume's utility-based argument. Instead, he believed that the genesis of justice could be found in sentiments of resentment, which puts him closer to Joseph Butler than Hume. On this basis, Rasmussen concludes that justice for Smith is a natural virtue (Rasmussen 2017: 99-101).¹⁴

As Rasmussen's title (*The Infidel and the Professor*) suggests, his book presents a fairly standard picture of Hume as the great heretic and almost an outcast in the Scotland of his day, which was heavily dominated by religious culture. This conventional image jars somewhat with James Harris's terrific intellectual biography of Hume (2015), one of the key contributions of which is to add nuance to this familiar picture of Hume as an anti-religious zealot. For example, Hume was shocked by the open atheism he witnessed in the company of d'Holbach in France, and he appears to have objected to its smugness (Harris 2015: 414; Rasmussen 2017: 124-5). Hume's thorough scepticism precluded him from taking such a definitive stance on the question of the existence of God, and we should therefore be cautious to associate him with the modern aggressive form of atheism personified by the late Christopher Hitchens. Even if his writings and especially his letters are replete with jibes at religion, Hume took too much pride in his moderation to have allowed himself to indulge in any kind of fanatic anti-religious quest. Harris's reading of Hume's take on religion is indeed one of the most innovative aspects of his biography.

¹³ It would be a mistake to think of Hume's thought as exclusively utilitarian, even though it has sometimes, since Leslie Stephen, been interpreted as such. In many areas, notably when explaining the workings of political authority, Hume relied on sentimentalist explanations and a psychologist theory of deference to complement considerations of utility.

¹⁴ See, however, Sagar (2017), who argues that Smith rejects the natural-artificial binary.

Yet if pushed too far, Harris's thesis can make us lose track of how notorious Hume actually was in his own lifetime, and Rasmussen's book, which is different in tone and emphasis more than anything, can be read as a corrective. For example, Rasmussen's chapters dealing with Hume's death (11 and 12) are full of citations and anecdotes which demonstrate how contentious a figure Hume was in his dying days and thereafter. Hume was, however, sometimes able to convert his detractors with his charm. An additional tale from Hume's contemporary Alexander Carlyle's *Autobiography* is illustrative:

[W]hen Robert Adam, the celebrated architect, and his brother, lived in Edinburgh with their mother, an aunt of Dr [William] Robertson's, and a very respectable woman, she said to her son, 'I shall be glad to see any of your companions to dinner, but I hope you will never bring the Atheist [i.e. Hume] here to disturb my piece.' But Robert soon fell on a method to reconcile her to him, for he introduced him under another name, or concealed it carefully from her. When the company parted she said to her son, 'I must confess that you bring very agreeable companions about you, but the large jolly man who sat next to me is the most agreeable of them all. 'This was the very Atheist,' said he, 'mother, that you was [sic] so much afraid of.' (Carlyle 1861: 272).

Carlyle further highlights that Hume had many friends among the younger clergy, himself included, 'not from a wish to bring them over to his opinions, for he never attempted to overturn any man's principles, but they best understood his notions, and could furnish him with literary conversation.' (Carlyle 1861: 274-5).

In any event, Rasmussen's interpretation of Smith as a much more cautious person and writer than Hume is plausible, even if Hume may also have been careful in some social settings. Concluding that it is impossible to know the exact nature of Smith's belief or disbelief due to his silence on the subject, Rasmussen, somewhat reluctantly, labels Smith a 'sceptical Deist' (2017: 16). The prime example of Smith's caution is his unwillingness as Hume's literary executor to publish the posthumous *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779). In the end the book was published by Hume's nephew, but if Smith had had his way the book would never have been published in his own lifetime (Rasmussen 2017: 192). His most controversial writing proved to be his *Letter to Strahan*, suffixed to Hume's brief autobiography ('My Own Life'), where Smith described his sceptical friend as 'approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit' (Rasmussen, 2017: 251). Smith famously said that his eulogy of Hume 'brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made on the whole commercial system of Great Britain' (i.e. in *The Wealth of Nations*) (2017: 223).

Most discussions of Hume and religion are focused on his philosophical writings, and in particular *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) and the *Dialogues*. One area in need of further research is his treatment of religion in the *History of England* (1754-62). It is in this work we find his most moderate comments about organised religion, and even his praise for having a strong state-church in order to supervise the nation's zealots (Hume, 1983: 1:311; 3:135-6, 4:354). We should note, however, that most of these comments occur in the Tudor and mediaeval volumes, and since Hume wrote his *History* backwards (as witches say their prayers, as one early critic sneered), they came after the controversial reception of the Stuart volumes. The first Stuart volume was particularly divisive, partly because of Hume's reluctance to criticise James I and Charles I, but also because of his treatment of religion (see, for example, Brown 1757: 57). It is clear that the hostile reactions did leave a mark on Hume (1994: xxxvii), although he had a tendency to exaggerate the negative reception of his works.

One additional, complementary, and admittedly rather speculative explanation may also be that Bolingbroke's collected *Works* (1754), whose most scandalous content concerned religion, began to be published around the time of the first volumes of Hume's *History*. From this time onwards, Hume became bundled together with Bolingbroke as the two major critics of religion of the age. Hume, who was not above vanity, would not have been pleased with this association since he viewed the English one-time Tory statesman as a sub-par philosopher (Greig ed., 1932: 1: 168, 214, 250). Bolingbroke's religious writings anticipated many of Hume's important claims, for example that polytheism preceded monotheism in the development of religious belief (1754, 1: 301). Nevertheless, after the appearance of Bolingbroke's posthumous *Works*, Hume wrote to the Abbé Le Blanc that 'The Clergy are all enrag'd against him [Bolingbroke]; but they have no Reason. Were they never attack'd by more forcible Weapons than his, they might for ever keep Possession of their Authority.' (Greig ed., 1932: 1: 208). In the latter 1750s, Hume may have desired to distance himself from Bolingbroke's reputation, and one way of doing so would have been to pay a somewhat backhanded and highly sceptically grounded compliment to organised religion, Bolingbroke's pet hatred, in the shape of the Church of England. On this question, as Rasmussen points out (even though he does not discuss the Bolingbrokean context), it was actually Smith who was the 'radical', as he advocated a free market of religious sects rather than a state church (2017: 176-7).

Berry's autobiographical introduction is a testimony to how much Scottish Enlightenment studies have grown since he began exploring the subject in the 1960s, the same decade it started to gain traction as a historiographical term. Rasmussen's highly readable book shows the sustained interest in, if not the continued evolution of, the field. This leaves this reader with the following question: what is the future direction of Scottish Enlightenment studies after the generation who, with admittedly very different approaches, laboured, and some of whom continue to labour, after 'the man' Forbes – the generation of Phillipson, Winch, and Hont, along with James Moore, Roger Emerson, M. A. Stewart, Knud Haakonssen, and, of course, Berry? Anna Plassart's *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution* (2015) indicates that an important part of future studies is likely to be the transformation of the Scottish intellectual culture from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, and the history of the Scottish Enlightenment's legacy. But there is certainly more to be done in the eighteenth century. What is imperative is that new historical and theoretical research is undertaken and that this great legacy does not become reduced to hero worship of Hume and Smith, because their importance and indeed greatness are not in doubt. As Berry points out (2018: 26), other key thinkers are crying out for attention, including William Robertson, Robert Wallace, John Millar, and, perhaps most urgently, Francis Hutcheson, often called the 'father' of the Scottish Enlightenment. Moreover, many of the suggestive themes raised by Trevor-Roper in a classic 1966 lecture remain largely unexplored, and none of them more so than the Jacobite contribution to Scottish intellectual life in the eighteenth century (2010: 24-5).¹⁵ The real business, in many ways, has only just begun.

¹⁵ See, however, Goldie (1991). For general discussion about the state of play in Scottish Enlightenment studies, see Emerson (2009: 225-48) and Wood (2015).

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