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Reading History in Britain and America, c.1750-1840.

By M. Towsey. Pp. xii, 314.

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. £75.00.

Sailing happily in the wake of the postmodern assault on authorial intent, Mark Towsey's clever and enjoyable book could easily have been subtitled 'the death of the historian'. Its main premise is that readers interpret the history they read in ways that have more to do with their own contexts and interests than with whatever the original authors were trying to communicate. Whilst Towsey's focus is on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by implication the work also acts as a morality tale for those working in the historical professions today.

In this book Towsey examines how readers on both sides of the Atlantic responded to the three bestselling historians of the day; Edward Gibbon, David Hume and William Robertson. Whilst two of those three were Scots, the contextual landscape within which Towsey considers their reception is much broader; imperial and anglophone rather than specifically Scottish. Using letters, diaries, notebooks and marginal annotations in copies of the history books themselves, the work explores how readers interpreted the work of those historians in widely varying ways. A case study approach is necessitated by the patchiness of the source material, but the result is persuasive nonetheless. The first two chapters focus primarily on approaches to reading, considering the practises of note-taking, selective transcription, commentary and marginalia that readers learnt as children and continued as adults. Towsey argues that this was a period of cheap editions, wide margins and autodidacticism; a confluence which made texts particularly malleable in the hands of those consuming them. These opening chapters also investigate the sway of review articles by often hostile critics, and the ways in which both publishers and readers sought to circumvent that influence. The final four chapters, which constitute the main thrust of the book, turn to the ways in which British and American readers used historical works as a means of reflecting upon the big issues of the era; such as constitution, revolution, union and empire. We are given manifold examples, from the British officer in Wellington's peninsula army using obscure passages from Robertson to give Spain an embryonic history of representation, to the East India Company employee using the same author to validate his pre-existing sense of English superiority over indigenous populations. Both positions are contrary to Robertson's wider argument, but his writings are nonetheless made to support them through selective acts of interpretation informed by the specific circumstances in which they were read. Elsewhere we see Gibbon being lionised for the lessons on religious toleration that his work on Rome contained, and simultaneously repudiating for the religious scepticism that underpinned that position. Hume's efforts to provide a constitutional backbone for a new post-Union Anglo-British identity, meanwhile, often sparked an interest in local rather than national history for those who read him.

These are just a few of the case studies that Towsey uses to show how readers in this era turned to history as a resource for understanding the political debates of their own time. But, thanks to the interventionist ways in which they read, it was the present that informed their interpretation of the past and not the other way around. He makes that case through a nuanced and sustained demonstration of how reading unusual sources against the grain can open up the thought-worlds of otherwise

unreachable people. The achievement here is to show the historian's traditional focus on the text alone for what it is; old-fashioned, out-moded and above all myopic.

There are a few areas in which things do not work as quite well as they might. Given its subject and approach, the book would have benefitted from a heftier dose of literary theory; after all, this is terrain that scholars of literature have covered in far more detail than their historical brethren. It could also have done with a deeper engagement with the antiquarian culture of the age, especially since there are hints that some of the readers discussed were actively engaged in such pursuits. More broadly, the book might have carried the implications of its findings to their logical conclusion. Here and there Towsey nods to the fact that the sheer diversity of reader responses to Gibbon, Hume and Robertson undermines our reliance on conveniently monolithic ideological labels like Enlightenment. What he does not do is take the next step and suggest that, in terms of how these texts were actually received, it makes no sense to talk about the Enlightenment at all.

But these are only minor flaws in what is an erudite, thoughtful and above all impressive piece of scholarship. Towsey offers a timely riposte to the majority of intellectual and cultural historians, including myself, who focus too much attention on the imperatives of creation and not enough on the contexts of reception. The book also has a certain ominous applicability to the present-day, when key moments from history are routinely invoked by political opportunists to support a plethora of ill-founded and antithetical agendas.

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