**Craig Smith, *Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Civil Society: Moral Science in the Scottish Enlightenment,* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 264 pp., £75 (Hardback), ISBN 9781474413275.**

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Modern interpreters of Adam Ferguson have routinely commented on the apparent contradictions, or at least the mixture of motley and unstable elements, which supposedly characterise his thought. He has commonly been read as less systematic and, by extension, a lesser thinker than his friends and Scottish compatriots David Hume and Adam Smith. In a similar spirit to Iain McDaniel’s *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment* (2013), Craig Smith seeks to demonstrate that Ferguson was indeed a fairly systematic thinker. However, in contrast with McDaniel’s book, which mainly focuses on Ferguson’s political concerns and their intellectual contexts (crucially, the spectre of Caesarism), Smith concentrates to a greater extent on Ferguson’s moral philosophy, and in this regard he builds on earlier monographs by David Kettler (1965) and Jack Hill (2017). At the heart of the book is the argument that philosophy in eighteenth-century Scotland had a different and broader meaning than today. Consequently, Ferguson’s approach to philosophy – like that of Hume and Adam Smith the author argues – was eclectic in order to better reflect the messy reality of moral experience, and its complexity should thus not be seen as a weakness. Moreover, despite key differences, all three were fundamentally committed to empiricism (based on generalisation from historical experience as well as introspection). Ferguson – again, like many of his fellow Scots – believed that philosophy had to be ‘practical, accessible, and above all a useful activity’ (47), separating him from much of modern philosophy with the partial exception of some applied philosophy.

Smith rightly argues that Ferguson’s legacy has been distorted as a result of the stress placed on republicanism and civic humanism in intellectual history in the last fifty years. J. G. A. Pocock, one of the key contributors to this republican narrative, once referred to Ferguson as the most ‘Machiavellian’ of the eighteenth-century Scots.[[1]](#footnote-1) Part of the explanation behind modern misconceptions of Ferguson, Smith asserts (3), is the dominance of his most famous book: *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767); this makes the title of Smith’s book seem somewhat odd, even if he does address ‘civil society’ at length in chapter five. The *Essay* enjoyed both fame and a degree of notoriety; none of his other works were as successful. However, Ferguson himself referred to the *Essay* as ‘introductory & Stimulating’[[2]](#footnote-2) – it was after all an *essay*. Later in life he wrote more extensive works, including his three-volume history of the Roman Republic (1783) and his mature lecture notes published as the *Principles of Moral and Political Science* in two volumes in 1792, after Ferguson had retired from his professorship in pneumatics and moral philosophy at Edinburgh University. The latter work in particular plays a seminal role in Smith’s interpretation, which offers a holistic treatment of Ferguson’s entire writing career – from his first pamphlets to his last unpublished essays – presented thematically rather than chronologically.[[3]](#footnote-3)

One of the potential weaknesses of Smith’s impressive and lucid book is his preoccupation with consistency, which – as Quentin Skinner points out in his classic methodological statement – can easily lead to the ‘mythology of doctrine’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Authors who write works in different genres spanning over several decades and perhaps aimed at various audiences rarely have one single intention or plan that can tie it all together. As James Harris argues in his magisterial biography of Hume (2015), a misguided pursuit of consistency has led many of Hume’s (modern) readers to view his entire writing career from the prism of his *Treatise of Human Nature.* On the question of consistency, Smith makes the point that Ferguson, while criticising the likes of Richard Price and Bernard Mandeville for using vocabulary loosely, was himself not entirely regular in his usage of language, at least not in different books (41-44). To be sure, loose terminology was indeed characteristic of much of eighteenth-century philosophy, which was in general more literary in comparison with, for example, Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century*,* whose geometrical methodology put a higher premium on precise definitions.

The problem is not only one of choice of words, however, but more fundamental. In fact, human beings rarely hold consistent views and sentiments. We have no problem in sympathising with Catullus when he says that he both loves and hates Lesbia at the same time.[[5]](#footnote-5) This becomes even more pronounced over time; to stick with Eros, we only need to consider divorce rates. On the other hand, it is of course possible and indeed often common for thinkers and writers to have stable intellectual commitments and concerns which they may express in different ways in different works. Despite Ferguson’s changing vocabulary, Smith argues rather convincingly that Ferguson should be seen as such a thinker. According to Smith, Ferguson had a ‘project’ consisting in combining moral science, or a study of moral experience (ch. 2), moral philosophy in the sense of a normative element (ch. 3), and moral pedagogy, meaning the preparation of students for a moral and patriotic life (ch. 4). Ferguson criticised Hume and Smith for failing to go beyond the first, descriptive step, as well as for erring in their empirical investigations by reducing moral experience to two master principles, in Hume’s case utility and in Smith’s case sympathy (25-9). Whether Ferguson was right in his criticisms or not, we can safely say that the less strict moralising in Hume and Adam Smith has made their philosophical works stand the test of time better.[[6]](#footnote-6) Ferguson’s firm moral commitments, and his more accentuated support for the Hanoverian British state, in contrast to the much more ‘sceptical Whiggism’ of Hume and Adam Smith, makes him look rather outdated, and is often described as ‘conservative’ (e.g. by Craig Smith: 134, 140).[[7]](#footnote-7) Much of what Ferguson did in his writing, as in his teaching, was to promote virtue and patriotism (see esp. ch. 4). Although there are good reasons why Hume and Adam Smith are likely to remain more widely read and recognised than Ferguson, we should note that this difference is a major reason why they were more inflammatory in their own day (especially Hume) and Ferguson more mainstream.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although this is primarily a textual study, Craig Smith makes thoughtful contextual points throughout the book. In the Introduction, for example, he argues – *pace* the late Nicholas Phillipson (1981) – that the formative event for what has become known as the ‘Scottish Enlightenment’ is more likely to have been the ‘death throes’ of the Jacobites in ‘1745’ (they were defeated at Culloden in April 1746) rather than the Union of 1707 with England, which created Great Britain as a political entity. As Smith stresses, Ferguson’s commitment to the Hanoverian Britishstate is perhaps his most important political commitment (15-16). Alas, the theme of Jacobitism is not one which Smith pursues at any considerable length beyond his brief remarks in the final chapter, but he is certainly right in stressing the significance of the Jacobite question for Ferguson and his generation. This is a crucial theme which warrants further research and much more attention in future studies of the intellectual culture of eighteenth-century Scotland.

One of the greatest virtues of *Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Civil Society* is its historical sensitivity. Regarding commercial society, Ferguson has all too often been read as a nostalgic proponent of republican austerity and simplicity, alternatively as a precursor to Marx’s theory of alienation. True, Marx was influenced by Ferguson, and cited him on the effects of the division of labour in *Capital.* But if we want to understand Ferguson rather than his afterlife we need to look elsewhere. Like all thinkers, Ferguson is of course much better understood in his own context. Boldly but entirely sensibly, Craig Smith – who is Adam Smith Senior Lecturer at Glasgow University – states that ‘The broad outline of Ferguson’s defence of commerce is essentially the same as Adam Smith’s.’ (179) Ferguson viewed commercial development as inevitable since human beings naturally strive to better their condition. He further believed that it was near impossible to distinguish necessities from luxuries, and was against government intervention in the economy (see esp. ch. 5).[[9]](#footnote-9) Arguing that modern civilisation represented *on balance* an advance on ancient republics such as Sparta and Rome, Ferguson was committed to the idea that modern civilisation in general and the British state in particular had developed legal systems which better protected rights, and that war especially had become less brutal and more civilised in the modern world (see esp. ch. 6). In a letter to Adam Smith a few months after the publication of the *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, he wrote that: ‘I have been for some time so busy reading you, and recommending and quoting you, to my students, that I have not had leisure to trouble you with letters…You are surely to reign alone on these subjects, to form the opinions, and I hope to govern at least the coming generations.’[[10]](#footnote-10)

At the same time, while Ferguson and Adam Smith agreed about the superiority of modern, commercial civilisation, neither of them was starry-eyed about the future, instead acutely aware of the possibility of decline or even implosion. This is a theme more fully treated in McDaniel’s more contextual work. Thanks to its broader remit in other respects, however, it is not an exaggeration to say that *Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Civil Society* is very likely to become the standard introduction (although it is much more than that) to Ferguson for a long time. Smith’s book is indeed the most thorough and overall convincing book-length interpretation of Ferguson’s thought to date.

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1. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 499. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ferguson to Thomas Cadell, 16 Nov 1792, in *The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson*, ed. Vincenzo Merolle (2 vols., London, 1995), II, 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For other examples of holistic interpretations, see L. Hill, The Passionate Society, and the

   briefer and more historical D. Allan, Adam Ferguson. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, *History & Theory,* 8 (1), 1969, 3-53, at 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It should be noted that neither was a moral relativist, but both were critics of what they regarded as superstitious practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In contrast to Smith, I believe that ‘conservative’ is too generic (most if not all ideologies want to conserve something, and revolutionaries usually become the most fanatical defenders of the status quo after the event), and carries too many unhelpful post nineteenth-century party political connotations to be a useful term to describe eighteenth-century politics and political thought. On this, see Richard Bourke (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A key study here is Richard Sher (1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Compared with Ferguson, Adam Smith had in fact much more to say in favour of government intervention, mainly in book five of the *Wealth of Nations.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ferguson to Adam Smith, 18 April 1776,*The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson,* I, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)