MARK TOWSEY, *Reading History in Britain and America, c.1750–c.1840.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 304. $99.99 (cloth).

*Reading History in Britain and America* is a landmark study that captures a key moment in the development of the reading public in the English-speaking world. Intellectual historians sometimes assume the significance of specific works by focusing on the importance of their arguments, canonical status, or with casual references to sales figures. The history of reading can be seen as part of an ongoing attempt to take intellectual history beyond the so-called Cambridge School’s focus on texts and the contexts in which they were conceived (11–12). Whereas Robert Darnton’s “social history of ideas” puts emphasis on networks of dissemination and in particular printers, Mark Towsey’s approach looks at readers as “active agents in shaping the meaning of texts” (16). This is evidently very different from the Skinnerian focus on authorial intentions, and it is building on the previous achievements of eighteenth-century historians Mark Spencer and David Allan (16–17), and Towsey’s own *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment* (2010).

In this new book, Towsey looks at how histories were read by regular readers in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and America. The histories of David Hume, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon were among the best-selling books of the age. As Hume put it in a letter to his publisher William Strahan, “this is the historical Age, and this the historical Nation.” By studying reading notes in archives from Aberystwyth in Wales to Worcester in Massachusetts, Towsey argues that reading histories had a profound impact on how Anglophone people understood the world in this period. “History books were a primary vehicle through which eighteenth-century readers learned about central facets of British national identity, including the Reformation, the mixed constitution, empire and the historical emergence of the United Kingdom,” he writes (24). The histories of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon, along with those of Bolingbroke, Robert Henry, Oliver Goldsmith, Horace Walpole, Catherine Macaulay, Tobias Smollett, Adam Ferguson, and a host of others were printed in numerous editions aimed at different markets. History books could in this way reach a large readership, many of whom were of modest means, and they thus formed a key part of the cultural landscape between 1750 and 1840. Readers could also borrow books through several book-lending institutions and reading clubs, and peruse excerpts in magazines and periodicals. Moreover, Britons carried these books across their empire and the English-speaking world.

Through exceptionally wide-ranging archival research, Towsey shows that readers invested a great deal of time in acquiring historical knowledge. Many made notes in the margins of books, others highlighted and transcribed specific passages, and some even produced their own abridged versions of longer works. Later in life, they often revisited the same texts, either to look up facts or to ponder new problems. Many of these readers were female, as Hume recommended in his early essay “Of the Study of History” (1741). Historical works were particularly important for forging a British identity since its (largely) uncodified constitution had to (and has to) be interpreted historically. Towsey argues that this gave rise to competing interpretations, not only among writers but also among readers. As he puts it: “the interpretive expectations of competing groups – Jacobites and radical Whigs, Catholics and Protestant dissenters, patriots and loyalists – informed how readers responded to the history books in front of them, with the result that the same books were read – and talked about – in radically different ways, often far removed from the original intentions of their authors.” (21).

Responses to Hume’s attempt to provide a more “neutral” constitutional history (which sought to negate the English exceptionalism of mainstream Whiggism which he loathed) are studied in chapter 3. Towsey argues that although Hume was undeniably popular, most read him with preconceived notions of what constituted acceptable interpretation, and although he may have had a deep impact on historiography in many respects, he did not manage to unsettle confidence in ancient constitutionalism in a wide sense. Later in the century, John Millar’s *Historical View of the English Government* (1787) revived a more conventional Whig reading of the past, to the delight of many readers, including the Yorkshire landowner and MP William Battie Wrightson (129). In America, as politics became increasingly polarized in the 1790s between political groupings of the executive and people, or court and country, respectively, Thomas Jefferson grew extremely critical of Hume as a historian and his potentially corrupting effects. Towsey believes that Jefferson would have been reassured had he seen the marginalia in the copies of Hume’s *History of England* at the Library Company of Philadelphia, where many readers dissented from what they perceived as Hume’s Tory leanings (206). In other words, in the New World as well as the Old, readers frequently mistook Hume’s description for espousal. While his sympathetic portrayal of Charles I as an individual aroused indignation, his explicit if skeptical embrace of the 1688-89 Revolution Settlement seems largely to have fallen on deaf ears.

*Reading History in Britain and America* prides itself on focusing on the reading habits of relatively ordinary readers. Be that as it may, those with an interest in political history are likely to be particularly interested in the many political actors who also feature in the book, including the Newcastle MP William Ord, who returned to his notes on Hume’s *History* as he developed his opinions on parliamentary reform in 1820s. In this way, the book’s methodology has the potential to pin down how ideas and intellectual productions relate to political action and concrete change. When Irish politicians, such as Francis Hutchinson, planned for greater legislative independence during Grattan’s parliament they turned to historians, including Hume, Clarendon, and Thomas Rymer. Towsey also shows that despite William Robertson’s respect for Indian civilization and his cautious stance on imperialist policy, his *Historical Disquisition on India* was often read by East India Company servants more straightforwardly as an instrument for imperial control. In contrast, Towsey states that Robertson’s *History of America* is likely to have influenced Beilby Porteus, bishop of Chester, to become involved in the abolitionist movement (256–57). Overall, this new contribution to the history of reading gives plenty of material and stimulation for thinking about how historical arguments have been utilized by political actors, and how mental universes and “interpretative communities” are constructed more broadly.

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