Of Libraries and Commonplace Books: Reading the Enlightenment in Britain

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Author: Mark Towsey
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David Allan’s Making British Culture and Mark R. M. Towsey’s Reading the Scottish Enlightenment pursue the same worthy goal: to give reading a larger role in the definition and conceptualisation of the Enlightenment, particularly in its Scottish manifestation. The connection between the two books runs deep. Towsey remarks that he was Allan’s student at St Andrews from his undergraduate days through supervision of the PhD thesis that evolved into his book (p. xii), and he has clearly learned much from his mentor. A geographical division of labour separates their efforts: Allan covers the response of English readers to books by Scottish authors during the years 1740–1830; Towsey confines himself to readers in provincial Scotland during roughly the same period. Both books initially devote much of their attention to the sites that encouraged reading and a reading culture, especially libraries. Both make notable contributions to our knowledge about where and how reading occurred in late 18th- and early 19th-century Britain—as does Allan’s volume on Georgian lending libraries, A Nation of Readers, which emerged, we are told (p. ix), as a by-product of the research on libraries for a chapter in Making British Culture. Both Making British Culture and Reading the Scottish Enlightenment culminate in a consideration of what Towsey terms ‘source material that illuminates the reading experience itself’, encompassing, among other things, surviving ‘diaries, literary
correspondence, marginalia and commonplace books’ from readers within their respective regions (p. 19). And both books run into similar difficulties by making questionable claims about the meaning of their empirical findings for understanding the significance of reading in the Enlightenment.

The segments on libraries and the rise of reading culture are the most successful. All three books, but particularly Allan’s *A Nation of Readers*, mine new sources of information about how libraries functioned in relation to the readers whom they served. Both authors fruitfully explore the distinction between, on the one hand, ‘the infectious spread of voluntary associationalism’ (*Nation of Readers*, p. 13), which inspired book clubs, subscription libraries, and the libraries of literary and philosophical societies that sprang up in larger British towns and, on the other hand, the commercialism which underpinned circulating libraries, run by booksellers for profit. Both show that the correlation between circulating libraries and novels – to which contemporary moralists attributed corrupting effects, especially on women – has been greatly exaggerated. Both have interesting things to say about less familiar kinds of libraries which also contained sizeable amounts of Enlightenment books, including private libraries (Towsey has tracked down information about 400 of them in provincial Scotland alone) and libraries maintained by religious institutions.

Allan’s main argument in this context is to demonstrate ‘the diversity, the ubiquity and the sheer inventiveness displayed by institutionalised book circulation in Georgian England – and thus the largely forgotten social and cultural significance of lending libraries in all of their many guises’ (*Nation of Readers*, p. 211). He makes his case. The handsome production of *A Nation of Readers* by the British Library, including fine paper, handsome illustrations, and eight tables, greatly adds to its value for the author’s purposes. The title phrase, ‘a nation of readers’, is taken from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, and Allan rightly contends that his book helps to establish the accuracy of Dr. Johnson’s words as a description of the British world of print during the second half of the 18th century. ‘Georgian society appeared in many ways to be a veritable riot of reading’, he writes, noting that one of the effects of the new library culture was to spread the reading bug to a much wider range of people (p. 209). What made the reading bug particularly contagious was the culture of politeness that put a premium on reading and helped to nurture it. Private libraries, for example, were not merely for the great men who could afford to build them, and did so; they also served others who were permitted to borrow books from such libraries, as both authors show. The polite culture of reading also manifested itself in ‘performance’, as families gathered to read aloud, for example, the sermons of Hugh Blair or James Fordyce, for mutual edification and pleasure.

Nor was the culture of Enlightenment reading confined to elites or to urban readers. From his survey of extant library catalogues, Towsey concludes that ‘the books which constituted the Scottish Enlightenment – at least as it is defined by modern scholarship – circulated very widely beyond Scotland’s three cities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, and they were indeed readily encountered, assimilated and discussed by readers quite far down the social scale’ (p. 305). His evidence bears out his claim, despite a few problematic statements about the books under discussion.(1) Although the library holdings in Towsey’s database were not in perfect sync with production figures – interestingly, some books by Scottish authors that were modest sellers according to publishers’ records turn up in relatively high numbers in different kinds of Scottish libraries, including works of conjectural history – the overall conclusion to be drawn from Towsey’s evidence on libraries is that the most popular books of the Scottish Enlightenment permeated Georgian Scotland. A similar conclusion arises from the chapters in Allan’s *Making British Culture* that assess the prevalence of Scottish Enlightenment holdings in English libraries.

These findings are significant. They demonstrate that access to 18th-century books was not limited to purchase (conversely, it has often been noted that those who could and did purchase books did not always read them) but rather occurred in a variety of ways that stemmed from the spread of a rich, complex and polite book culture. They also show – contrary to a hypothesis that is currently in fashion (2) – that this culture cannot be reduced to a simplistic dualism between an educated, wealthy elite, supplied by a small cadre of monopolistic London booksellers, and the ignorant masses beneath them, who read whatever inferior old works slipped through the booksellers’ copyright net. On the contrary, the works of the Scottish Enlightenment were accessible to relatively large numbers of readers while they were still in copyright, and
the transformation of Britain into a nation of readers was well underway during the age of Johnson.

Unfortunately, when Allan and Towsey turn from the conditions of reading to reading itself, their books are less rewarding. Both are first-rate researchers who have uncovered large amounts of fresh data in British and American archives, and their empirical approach is commendable. Yet the significance of the commonplace books, marginalia, and other kinds of evidence of reading that Allan and Towsey have discovered is open to debate. Most seriously, their samples are so small and haphazard that there is no reason to consider them representative of anything except particular readers’ responses to this or that book. Since the majority of commonplace books consist largely of passages copied directly from the works being read, or from second-hand accounts of those works, both authors lavish their attention on a handful of accounts by critical readers. As one might expect, the most controversial examples concern responses to David Hume, with readers often dividing over his History of England according to their religious and political affiliations and nearly always rejecting the scepticism in his philosophical writings.

There is nothing surprising about these responses, which vary greatly in depth of analysis and often lack much chronological and historical context. Yet both authors draw conclusions from them which are sometimes difficult to fathom. Towsey acknowledges that evidence of reading ‘in letters, diaries, marginalia and commonplace books’ can never represent more than ‘a tiny sample of historical reading experience’ (p. 260). Of that sample, furthermore, a majority were ‘submissive readers’ (p. 302) who rarely took issue with the books they read, and most of the readers in his sample also adhered implicitly to the core values of the Enlightenment, such as toleration, cosmopolitanism, and polite learning (p. 296). He nevertheless asserts, on the basis of his small sample, that provincial readers in Scotland ‘developed their own brand of Enlightenment, which was distinct in a number of important ways from that produced by the Edinburgh literati’ (p. 20). ‘In whole-heartedly banishing Hume’s scepticism from their intellectual lives’, he goes on to explain, ‘contemporary readers therefore formulated their own brand of Enlightenment that was fundamentally different from the Scottish Enlightenment as it is often described in modern scholarship’ (p. 292). Towsey’s evidence, however, does not sustain the notion of a distinctive ‘brand of Enlightenment’ in the Scottish provinces. It merely shows that some readers who lived outside Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen left behind information about their reading. The Edinburgh literati were not in agreement about all things, and none of them except Hume endorsed philosophical scepticism. The hotbed of anti-Humean thought in Scotland was Aberdeen, which Towsey bars from his definition of the provincial Scottish Enlightenment by virtue of its status as a large town. Few commentators on the Scottish Enlightenment would exclude from it Thomas Reid, George Campbell, and other Aberdonian thinkers who wrote against Hume’s scepticism. More generally, the relationship between ‘province’ and town in 18th-century Scotland was far more fluid than Towsey seems to think. Prominent Edinburgh clergymen of letters such as William Robertson and Robert Henry were ‘provincial’ parish ministers until they received calls to Edinburgh, and landed Edinburgh literati such as the juridical lords Kames and Monboddo were likely to divide their time between the Scottish capital and their rural estates. Towsey provides no comparative analysis of his Scottish provincial readers in relation to others, such as the English readers featured in Allan’s study or Scottish readers in metropolitan areas. And because he groups all provincial readers between the mid 18th century and 1820 into a single cohort, he fails to consider how the passage of time may have affected reading. The same neglect of comparative and temporal issues characterises Allan’s work.
Making British Culture begins in promising fashion. Allan frames his work in terms of a fundamental opposition between the production and consumption of books, with a view towards demonstrating the previously unappreciated importance of the latter. He points out that more work has been done on authors of Scottish Enlightenment books than on their readers, and he states his intention to redress the balance. He insists on the role of readers in shaping the Enlightenment, as active participants rather than merely passive recipients. He explicitly rejects the extremism of radical reception theorists and deconstructionists such as Derrida and Barthes, who would banish the author in order to exalt the reader, and opts instead for a more balanced and contextual approach, which takes into account authors as well as readers (pp. 15–16). He also rejects the ‘abstract’ character of much reception theory and promises an ‘empirically grounded account’ of actual readers in action (pp. 17–19), and he delivers on that promise in chapters six through ten.

Allan’s concluding chapter, however, goes far beyond what the opening chapter has led one to expect, and even farther beyond what the empirical evidence in the preceding chapters has shown. Instead of viewing authorship and reading as two vital components of print culture, and two complementary sources of knowledge about the Scottish Enlightenment, Allan becomes a fervent crusader for reading alone. Building on a comment by the theorist Stanley Fish, he argues that the historian’s concern with the context of written utterances should be focussed on the contexts in which reading occurs: ‘The crucial point here is that the justifiable emphasis upon context in the mind of the historian now becomes less an argument for investigating the original performance of the text’s creator and much more a matter of directing our attention to the peculiar circumstances in which individual acts of reading, themselves conceived as performative actions which generate meaning, subsequently occurred’ (p. 225). Later he calls for ‘a renewed emphasis upon the consumers rather than the producers of texts’ as a means of gaining insight into the relationship between the Enlightenment and other aspects of society, and he asserts the ‘dominant place of reading’ in transforming English perceptions of Scotland and Britain (p. 240, emphasis added). But why should greater emphasis on reading (and its contexts) occur at the expense of writing and publishing (and their contexts), as if book history were a zero-sum game? Allan argues further that in regard to print, supply is determined wholly by demand, and that ‘the great achievement of contemporary Scottish authorship, and of the Scottish Enlightenment, if that is still how we wish to describe it, was actually to serve as a disproportionately important source of supply in the widening market-place for reading materials’ (p. 240). What can ‘important’ mean in this sentence? If it is a qualitative judgement, then it begs the question of the special characteristics on the publication side of the equation, which made the works of the Scottish Enlightenment distinctive and compelling. If, as seems more likely, it is meant as a purely quantitative judgement, then the achievement of Scottish Enlightenment authors consists of nothing more than their success at producing and promoting large numbers of books. The content of those books would not matter much, because all meaning is made by their readers. Ultimately, then, Allan wishes to prepare us ‘to begin conceptualising the Enlightenment as a whole in a quite different way, as the aggregation of the countless personal responses of largely anonymous men and women to what they read’ (p. 238). Or to put it a little differently: ‘Enlightenment in its own time … was nothing more than whatever a man or woman reading, say, Beattie’s Essay on Truth or Reid’s Inquiry at that point actually construed it as being’ (p. 239).

Thus, Allan ends up in the position he had initially rejected: touting an Enlightenment in which authors have become inconsequential. Such a conclusion is not justified by the empirical evidence that has been marshalled in the preceding five chapters. There, many individual instances of English encounters with Scottish Enlightenment books are skilfully depicted, using marginalia, emendations, annotations, newspaper cuttings, commonplace books, correspondence, and other sources. But what is the outcome of those efforts? Once again, the sample is small and random, and the findings unsurprising and inconclusive. On the rare occasions when there is unanimity, it is just where we would expect it to be – such as the widespread antagonism that readers everywhere felt towards Hume’s sceptical philosophy. More commonly, the reactions of different readers cancel each other out. Some engage in ‘contestative reading’, in Steven Zwicker’s terminology (p. 122) (3), while others seek ‘affirmation of existing viewpoints’ (pp. 126–7). Some English readers become more receptive to Scotland (and Britain) as they read books by Scots, while others become increasingly chauvinistic and defensive about their Englishness. Readers of Hume’s History of England
record opposite reactions based largely on their own ideological and religious beliefs. And so on. All the empirical evidence about readers’ responses points towards conclusions that are modest and restrained rather than far-reaching and strident. Yet the last chapter of the book takes the latter path. Although that chapter is titled ‘Consequences’, it has less to do with the results of the empirical research so carefully presented in earlier chapters than with the author’s personal vision of how the history of the Enlightenment ought to be conceptualised and written.

*Making British Culture* and *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment* have the same strengths and weaknesses. For their fine research on the conditions of reading the Scottish Enlightenment, both in Scotland and England, and particularly their treatment of libraries, they (as well as Allan’s *A Nation of Readers*) are valuable additions to the growing literature on the book history of the Enlightenment in Britain. Their depictions of responses to reading by ordinary people are very welcome as case studies of how the Scottish Enlightenment was encountered by a small number of contemporary English and Scottish readers. At the same time, the dubious conclusions that these books draw from this empirical evidence limit the value of their contributions to the history of reading in general and to the reception of Scottish Enlightenment publications in particular.

**Notes**

1. For example, Towsey misleadingly categorises John Millar’s *Distinction of Ranks* as a book ‘more challenging’ (p. 39) and ‘more technical’ (p. 73) than Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Lord Kames’s *Sketches of the History of Man*, and even Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (p. 154), and he refers to that easily accessible and moderately priced work by Millar as ‘rare and prohibitively expensive’ (p. 155). Thomas Reid’s *Inquiry into the Human Mind* was not necessarily ‘more difficult’ than the same author’s two large volumes of *Essays* (p. 155), and the same page contains incorrect bibliographical information about James Beattie’s essay on poetry and music. Back to (1)


David Allan has read the review and declines to comment.

Mark Towsey has received the review article, but prefers to let other book reviews speak for the contributions made by his book to debates about the history of reading and the social impact of the Enlightenment.

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