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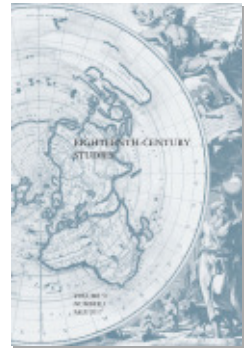
Differing Echoes of History

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REVIEWS

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Differing Echoes of History

Peter Lindfield, *Georgian Gothic: Medievalist Architecture, Furniture and Interiors 1730–1840* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2016). Pp. 282. \$99.00.

Andrea Walkden, *Private Lives Made Public: The Invention of Biography in Early Modern England* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2016). Pp. 216. \$70.00.

Jia Wei, *Commerce and Politics in Hume’s “History of England”* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2017). Pp. 220. \$99.00.

In their different ways, these works all serve as reminders of the salience of the historical imagination in the long eighteenth century. That observation may appear counterintuitive as the Enlightenment is usually noted as a period of novelty and change, and historicist elements are not in the forefront of the analysis of the period. This approach, however, represents a misreading of the understanding of the time, notably of the relationships between past, present, and future. Indeed, in order to understand the England of the long eighteenth century, it is important to consider its engagement with history. This was an age that took an understanding of the past very seriously and employed this understanding in much of its discussion. England was suffused with history. That, of course, is not how it is presented in posterity; instead, the narrative is one of change—indeed, of revolution. A plethora of revolutions, a veritable line “to the crack of doom,” as if shown to Macbeth by the witches, are found: starting with the first and most famous, the Industrial, and now including the Agricultural, Transport, Financial, Commercial, Consumer, Demographic, Emotional, Sexual, and others. More eighteenth-century revolutions, doubtless, will follow from the fertile keypads of historians. The continuing emphasis is on new ideas, new techniques, new technologies, particularly steam power; on the birth of new sciences, such as economics, sociology, and geology; and on

new cultural forms and themes, notably the novel, the landscape garden, and the Neo-Gothic. The idea of the Enlightenment, indeed of an English Enlightenment, adds a sense that even the very context of ideas was changing. And secularization theorists suggest that religion was on its way out beginning in the eighteenth century. In such accounts, England appears to be a country propelling itself away from its past and very self-consciously toward a transformed future.

Why, then, see historical writing from this period as anything other than a branch of belles lettres? Indeed, there was relatively little then (although much more, concerning both national and local history, than is generally appreciated) of the archive-based research that was to be highly significant in the age of “scientific history” assumed to begin in the nineteenth century. In part, the latter reflected the methods, as well as the location, of a history that was increasingly pursued in universities. Moreover, in considering the earlier period, it is apparent that the English historians of the eighteenth century did not define their own era. Nor were they as influential in cultural terms, at least for posterity, as those writers who developed the novel or the Romantic movement, or, arguably, the landscape gardeners of the period.

Yet eighteenth-century England, the society that more than any other contributed to the creation of the modern age, was itself profoundly historical. This was the case in terms of thought, religion, politics, law, society, literature, art, architecture, music, sculpture, and much else. It was true at all levels of society. Indeed, a sense of history was a unifying social force, a shared interest between mansion and cottage. Therefore, whereas the focus of attention in works about eighteenth-century history is very much on the culture of print, and notably on books with the word “history” in their titles, this does not mean that the approach to the subject necessarily should be mostly in these terms, and certainly not entirely so. Indeed, the literary, like the academic, approach to historiography poses many disadvantages, as it can lead to a failure to appreciate the full range of engagement with history that was seen in the period, and, in practice, in others: what can be termed the “historical culture.”

Historical writing and consciousness in the eighteenth century were dominated by contemporary interests and preoccupations. In this respect, history then was as present-centered as it has been in subsequent (and previous) centuries. Major topics such as the character of civil and religious liberties, the nature and legitimacy of the state, the engagement with interests overseas, and the nature of society and civilization presented opportunities for historical writers to connect the past with the present. In order to make that connection, writers had to use argument by analogy; and the use of analogy opened discussion of the validity of the comparison being made.

The three books under review all contribute significantly to this understanding. Each one, of course, enters a crowded field. Andrea Walkden notes the work of others, especially the collection *Writing Lives: Biography and Textuality, Identity and Representation in Early Modern England*, edited by Kevin Sharpe and Steven Zwicker (Oxford, 2008). Her own choice of biographers in what is a brief work is necessarily selective. Unfortunately, this means that others are omitted, notably Gilbert Burnet, who produced biographies of John, Earl of Rochester and Matthew Hale, each designed to offer models for the right form of social leadership. Walkden presents a political reading of biography, suggesting that such narratives were designed to advance political arguments. She repeatedly claims that lives and life stories offered a means to put contentious beliefs beyond variance or debate.

While her close textual readings indeed offer much of substance and, notably, an interesting approach to what she valuably terms “biographical populism,” there is a tendency to undervalue the salience of religious concerns. Dissent is treated as political and not, as it should be, primarily as religious.

Peter Lindfield looks at historical understanding in a very different context, that of design and its related grasp both by and on the imagination. He argues that the Georgian Gothic has been misunderstood: far from being a curiosity in the eighteenth century, marginalized by Classicism, it was an important style both in its own right and because it could be incorporated into dominant fashions. Moreover, Lindfield thus reveals the appeal of medievalism, which indeed can be further demonstrated by a consideration of art and drama. George III sponsored the historical paintings of Benjamin West, whose *Edward III Crossing the Somme* (1788) showed how revered past monarchs could be portrayed in a dramatic fashion in order to reflect glory on their current successor. Beginning in 1784, the popular royal academician James Northcote helped to form an impression of the national past with such paintings as *Sir William Walworth . . . Killing Wat Tyler* (1787) and *The Murder of the Young Princes in the Tower* (1786). Plays such as Thomas Hull’s *Henry the Second* (1773) and George Colman the Younger’s *The Surrender of Calais* (1791), poems such as Thomas Gray’s *The Bard* (1757), and histories such as George, Lord Lyttelton’s *Henry the Second* (1767) all contributed to the interest in the medieval past. This, then, is not a topic to be left with Horace Walpole.

Jia Wei offers a mercantile reading of Hume’s *History of England*, showing how he built his work on an analysis of the significance of commerce for the development of society. In turn, Hume noted problems arising accordingly, notably those of threats to public morality and to strategic interests. For example, he saw the transfer of national wealth to the middling orders as a cause of political instability in the seventeenth century, and relates this to rivalry with both France and the Dutch. Hume’s analysis of the Glorious Revolution is also given a reading in terms of the development of a commercial society. Although not a particularly original work, Wei’s book deserves attention because it is an effective study of a significant subject.

In combination, these three volumes indicate the vitality of the field, although it still needs to be discussed in light of another major scholarly development in recent years, that of the understanding of the centrality of religious concerns.