

# From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment

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“He (Adam Smith) wanted to show how from being a savage, (man) rose to be a Scotchman.” (Walter Bagehot)

*The Rev. Dr. Folliot:*

“Pray, Mr. MacQuedy, how is it that all gentlemen of your nation begin everything they write with the ‘infancy of society?’”

(Thomas Love Peacock, *Crotchet Castle*)

The purpose of this essay is to consider an intellectual method which enjoyed a considerable vogue among the *philosophes* of Scotland. This method, ‘conjectural history,’ appears to be the direct or indirect source of many of the schemes of social evolution so popular in the nineteenth century, but it has itself been little investigated, and often misunderstood by assimilation to its progeny.

## I. *The Nature of Conjectural History*

‘Conjectural history’ was, it seems, first distinguished from the more conventional narrative form of history by Dugald Stewart.<sup>1</sup> He remarked on its use in the writings of Adam Smith, but the sort of inquiry to which we find Stewart referring is a method for understanding social phenomena which was characteristic of a whole group of Scottish writers, and we may take what he tells us about Smith as preliminary identification of the method.

Stewart explained conjectural history as arising out of comparisons between “our intellectual acquirements, our opinions, manners and institutions, [and] those which prevail among rude tribes” (whether of the past or the present). Such comparisons, he claimed, cannot fail to raise the question “by what *gradual* steps the transition has been made from the first simple efforts of uncultivated nature, to a state of things so wonderfully artificial

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1. D. Stewart, “An Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith”, prefixed to Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (reprint; New York, 1966), pp. xli-xlii (my italics). This may be an unconscious echo of J. J. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, ed. G. D. H. Cole (London and New York, 1913, 1966), p. 161, where Rousseau describes his account as “mere conditional or hypothetical reasonings, rather calculated to explain the nature of things, than to ascertain their actual origins.”

and complicated.” And since there is no reliable documentation about “many of the most important steps . . . we are under the necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture” about how “men are likely to have proceeded” from savagery to civilization. Such conjectures are to be based on “the principles of [men’s] nature and the circumstances of their external environment.”<sup>2</sup>

On Stewart’s statement of the matter, then, conjectural history traces a ‘process’ or ‘progress’ between a *terminus a quo*, namely “the first simple efforts of uncultivated nature,” and a *terminus ad quem*, the “wonderfully artificial and complicated condition” in which we find ourselves. This progress is to be explained by setting out a chain of ‘possible’ or ‘natural’ (but not, or not necessarily, actual) causes. For reasons not explained, the transition is deemed to be “gradual” or “by stages.” The method, it seems, is simply a *faute de mieux*, a way of filling out the *lacunae* in the documentary record: “. . . when we cannot trace the process by which an event *has been* produced, it is often of importance to be able to show how it *may have been produced* by natural causes.” But a quite different and much stronger claim for the method follows immediately: “In most cases, it is of more importance to ascertain the progress that is most simple, than the progress that is most agreeable to fact; for paradoxical as the proposition may appear, it is certainly true that the *real* progress is not always the *most natural*.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the subject, the ‘historical individual’ whose conjectural history is being traced, was sometimes specified by Stewart as being “language,” or “the history of the sciences, the arts, government,” (that is, somewhat delimited and determinate entities), at other times as “mind,” “mankind,” and even “our intellectual acquirements, our opinions, manners and institutions.” Stewart’s witness in this regard is somewhat suspect, for he wrote very much *post festum* — he may in fact be said to have been constructing mausolea — and we would do well to suspend judgment until we have surveyed the evidence.

## II. Conjectural History and Other Histories

If Stewart was able to distinguish conjectural history from other sorts of history, the group of writers that concerns us was not. Nor may the distinction be made by reference to specific

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2. *Ibid.*, (my italics).

3. *Ibid.*, (my italics).

works. It is plain that Ferguson's *Essay*, Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man*, several of Hume's *Essays*, and his *Natural History of Religion* conform closely to Stewart's account of conjectural history, whereas Hume's *History*, Robertson's *History of Scotland*, Kames's *Historical Law Tracts*, and Millar's *History of the English Government* do not. But Smith's *Wealth of Nations* cannot be classified in this way, and Robertson's *History of America* moves with astonishing facility between conjectural and narrative, document-based history. The latter work deserves special attention here, in that Dr. Robertson was one of the most professional and highly-regarded historians of his day, whose habit it was to contrast those who could afford to indulge in the "extravagance of conjecture" and the historian, who has "a more limited province, confined to what is established by certain or highly probable evidence."<sup>4</sup> He evidently did not regard what we are describing as conjectural history as falling under this anathema. And the same movement between narrative and conjectural history is apparent in many of the 'historical' writings of the group.

The explanation for this apparent lack of self-consciousness may perhaps be found in the rather conventional *philosophe* view of historiography that the Scottish philosophers professed. As devout Baconians, they were all too likely to at once explain and justify their enterprise by an appeal to social utility. Indeed, since history was undoubtedly part of moral<sup>5</sup> inquiry or science, such a justification was hard to escape. As Hume put it, "The end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty;"<sup>6</sup> and history had its part to play in the scheme of moral science as "philosophy teaching by example," in Bolingbroke's phrase.

Now a history written according to such specifications, a *histoire en philosophe*, might be an account of some past episode(s) written with a view to pointing a moral, or to illustrating or con-

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4. W. Robertson, *The History of the Discovery and Settlement of America* (hereafter, *America*), in *Works*, ed. D. Stewart (Edinburgh, 1829), II, 60, 93, 101, 105, 106, etc. Robertson was Principal of the University of Edinburgh, a leading liberal churchman of his time, and Historiographer Royal for Scotland. He was a life-long friend of David Hume, and highly regarded by many *philosophes* and Edward Gibbon.

5. In the eighteenth century this term encompassed the whole range of meanings from what is done (mores) to what ought to be done (morals). The French term *moeurs* had the same range.

6. D. Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, in A. MacIntyre (ed.), *Hume's Ethical Writings* (London, 1965), p. 25.

firming some general proposition (or 'principle')<sup>7</sup> concerning human nature or conduct, or it might be a narrative designed to celebrate the present or to advance some current cause. But strictly speaking, the past for such a history would be simply a vast reservoir of factual information for the social scientist to draw on, and both the cast of the narrative (if the narrative form is adopted at all) and the choice of subject matter would be governed by the end in view. The past-ness of the material recounted would not be significant *per se*.

There is no shortage of *philosophe* writings of this sort. Thus Montesquieu, doyen of the moral scientists, made no attempt at historical narrative. In the bulk of his *Spirit of the Laws* 'historical' material served simply to inform and confirm a general theory about the mainsprings (*ressort*) of three different types of polity. Again, Voltaire wrote a weighty tome to illustrate the diverse forms and disastrous consequences of superstition and fanaticism; the beneficent effects of great men (especially governors) on the lives and morals of peoples; and the universality of Deism and a dogma-free religion of humanity amongst peoples of whom the enlightened man could be expected to approve.<sup>8</sup> And even a work as concerned with coherence and elegance of narrative and as scrupulous in documentation as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* conveyed an enlightened moral about the "triumph of religion and barbarism." Dr. Warton commented on his contemporaries' habit of looking "back on the savage condition of our ancestors with the triumph of superiority; we are pleased to mark the steps by which we have been raised from rudeness to elegance, and our reflections on the subject are accompanied with conscious pride arising, in great measure, from a tacit comparison of the infinite disproportion between the feeble efforts of remote ages and our present superiority of knowledge."<sup>9</sup> And in some writers such as Helvetius, 'historical' references are merely incidental, illustrative, and designed to divert and sustain interest.

If we now turn to what the Scots wrote, we find that it does not conform at all closely either to their formal pronouncement about the nature and function of historiography or to *philosophe* model histories. Our Scottish historians were no doubt far from

7. Bentham's definition of "A Principle: What" in *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (Ch. I, note 2), sums up the typical confusions of this term in the eighteenth century.

8. Voltaire, *Essai sur les Moeurs et l'Esprit des Nations* (Paris, 1963), 2 vols.

9. T. Warton, *The History of English Poetry* (London, n.d.), I, 3.

averse to pointing morals and substantiating principles in the approved manner. And (to take but one example), Dr. Robertson's comments about the "listless indolence" and "cruelty" of the "barbarous and savage" peoples of America are not free from Dr. Warton's "conscious pride."<sup>10</sup> But such considerations neither define nor delimit nor exhaust their work. "The Scots did not enlist as drummers to beat the March of Mind."<sup>11</sup> The historical passages selected when the Scots wrote narrative history were those which they happened to find interesting; the moral did not dictate the narrative, even when there was a moral and not just that simple indulgence of curiosity and that disinterested love of truth and intelligibility which the Scots allowed as a possible, if uncommon, motive.<sup>12</sup> And what may ultimately have made it impossible for them to distinguish conjectural history from narrative history was that the former differed from the latter not in attempting to construct intelligible sequences of events, nor in attempting to find evidence for such sequences, nor in the sort of explanations of changes advanced, (for there was no difference between the two in these respects), but simply in the fact that the sequences narrated in conjectural history were deemed to be *typical*, whereas the sequences of narrative documentary history were *unique* and *particular*. This point will be developed below.

Conjectural history, then, did not conform to *philosophe* paradigms, and the Scots' explicit doctrine of history did not adequately describe any of the sorts of history that they wrote, let alone permit a distinction between conjectural and 'empirical' history. We must, therefore, examine the method in use. And in doing so, we should have before our minds the following questions. First, how is the 'initial' condition of man to be understood? What counted as conclusive evidence for or against assertions about it? Second, what kind of 'natural' causes were thought to be operative in the transition from the first condition of man to the last? And third, what is conjectural history a history of? It has been assumed much too readily that when *philosophes* spoke of 'progress,' they had in mind much the same sort of thing as did the Com-

10. Robertson, *America*, pp. 60, 86, 101.

11. See D. Forbes's Preface to his edition of A. Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (hereafter, *Civil Society*), (Edinburgh, 1966), p. xiv.

12. See, for example, D. Hume, *Essays* (London, 1903), Part I, Essay XIV, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences": "Curiosity, or the love of knowledge, has a very limited influence . . ." See also note 41. And in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part VII, Section III, Smith, having described something as "a mere matter of philosophical curiosity," proceeds to examine it.

teans, Marxists, and other partisans of "the march of mind" or "social development." But there is no necessary connection between conjectural history and the idea of the whole past as composing one continuity, and a continuity, what is more, of unilinear progress. Indeed, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*,<sup>13</sup> which in some respects served as a model of conjectural history, recited a natural history of corruption and disintegration. Nor is there any necessary connection between the practice of conjectural history and the belief that the proper subject of such a history is "mankind," "the human race" or "the mind." What then was the subject of conjectural history as the Scots practiced it, and what judgments did they make about the process as a whole?

### III. *The Evidence: (a) The Initial Condition*

What general assertions about conjectural history are licensed by a survey of the evidence?

Conjectural histories begin at the beginning. The beginning is a condition variously referred to as "man's primeval state," "rude and unpolished hordes" (Ferguson), "original and most simple state of society" (Robertson), "very early age of society," "nascent society" (Kames), "rude ages," "barbarians" (Millar), "first origin," "the first ages of the world" (Hume), "rude, uncultivated ages," "first ages of society," "early and rude state" (Smith), "rude tribes" (Stewart), and so forth. The people living in this condition are described as "savages" or "barbarous."<sup>14</sup> All these terms were used interchangeably, for variety's sake, but the epithet "rude" was considered particularly apposite.

Scottish philosophers often wrote as if all such beginnings were located in remotest antiquity. This was merely artistic license for the most part: both historically remote and still existing peoples were deemed to be living in the initial condition. For barbarous and polished peoples to exist contemporaneously was usual and normal: it was only their coexistence in the same society that called for special explanations.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it was one of the pre-

13. A. Smith, "A Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review" (1755), in J. R. Lindgren (ed.), *The Early Writings of Adam Smith* (New York, 1967), pp. 23-28, was specifically designed *inter alia* to make a wider public aware of this work.

14. Ferguson's technical distinction, drawn from Montesquieu, between 'savages' and 'barbarians' did not, I think, attain currency. Robertson used the terms interchangeably. See *America*, pp. 55, 57, 86, 91.

15. As was the case in Scotland. The Highland/Lowland, Scotland/England antithesis was often in Smith's mind. See his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, n.d.), pp. 58, 70, 314, 549, 757.

mises of conjectural history that extant barbarous people afford us evidence about our own barely recorded beginnings. Thus the comparison between contemporary American Indians and the ancient tribes of Germany, Rome, and Greece was a commonplace.<sup>16</sup> And Dr. Robertson held the Moderns to be vastly better placed to “complete the history of the human mind” than the Ancients, precisely because the Ancients did not know any men “in the earliest and rudest state,” whereas we are reliably informed about the inhabitants of the New World who live “in a state of society so extremely rude, as to be unacquainted with those arts which are the first essays of human ingenuity in its advance towards improvement.”<sup>17</sup>

The point to be stressed here is that the subject of conjectural history is not this or that society, or (still less) the human race, but the *typical* ‘society,’ ‘nation,’ or ‘people.’<sup>18</sup> This typical, or in Weber’s sense ‘ideal,’ society is taken to have a typical starting-point, namely the ‘rude and savage condition,’ just as it has a typical course of advancement. This starting-point was thought of as an historical one in the sense that in the case of the very first societies in remotest antiquity, that starting-point and the typical or ‘ideal’ starting point must have been identical, and also in the sense that of certain actual societies, although not of all, it could be confidently assumed that they were not the relics of some previously advanced and then decayed society. In general, however, it seems plain that the ‘initial condition’ is in fact simply a postulate made necessary by the assumption of conjectural history that accomplishments, arts, sciences, civility, ‘polish,’ are all to be understood as the outcome of a long, gradual process of ‘advancement,’ a process which must by definition have begun somewhere. That beginning was then construed as an historical one, even though no documentary evidence is available for most societies. But that deficiency, so it was thought, might be repaired by reference to the characteristics of still extant rude societies, or of rude societies of

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16. See, for example, Cadwallader Colden, *History of the Five Indian Nations of Canada* (3rd edn.; London, 1755): “We are fond of searching into remote antiquity, to know the Manners of our earliest Progenitors; and if I am not mistaken, the Indians are living Images of them.” See also Ferguson, *Civil Society*, p. 79, J. Millar, (*infra*), Ch. I, section I, and Robertson, *America*, pp. 85-86.

17. *Ibid.*

18. For this reason Scottish conjectural history is to be distinguished from the grandiose schemes of ‘historical evolution’ of the nineteenth century. An assimilation between these distinct kinds of writing is strongly implied in R. Meek, “Adam Smith, Turgot and the Four Stages Theory,” *Journal of the History of Political Economy*, III (Spring, 1971), and in A. Swingewood, “The Origins of Sociology,” *British Journal of Sociology*, XXI, (2) (1970).

which reliable accounts had been given by observers from polished ones. Rudeness was taken to be much the same irrespective of time and place. The circularity of reasoning here is apparent.<sup>19</sup>

Now, the Scots were careful to distinguish this 'rude' and 'barbarous' condition from that 'condition of nature' which was so popular a feature of the kind of political theory which in other respects they considered most authoritative; that is to say, the theories of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. For what conjectural history required, in accordance with the Scots' doctrines of correct method, was a starting-point grounded in experience. Hobbes and Rousseau, however, explicitly denied that "there was (ever) such a time, (or) condition" as their state of nature; all that their logic required was that such a situation was possible, and that possibility (both of them thought) was guaranteed by the nature of man. The Scots, however, rejected both their conceptions of natural man and such 'hypothetical' reasonings. Locke's account was more acceptable from the point of view of its matter, but he had characteristically equivocated about the historicity of his state of nature: to those of a rationalist bent he offered inference from eternal principles of nature, reason, and justice; to those demanding historical evidence, he tartly rejoined that government is everywhere antecedent to records.<sup>20</sup> He thus combined with the greatest nicety the appeal to reason and the appeal to immemorial antiquity. What he failed to provide was sufficient anthropological material to satisfy the taste of an 'experimental' generation.

Our philosophers evidently thought they had avoided fanciful speculations and unsound 'hypotheses' by founding conjectural history on the rock of the 'experimental method.' Nonetheless, their distinction between what they accepted (a 'rude and barbarous condition') and what they rejected (the idea of a state of nature) will not hold water; it is simply an expression of their belief that their thinking was all that it ought to have been. They simply converted the traditional state of nature into a postulated first stage in a postulated progress of an ideal society.

Thus conjectural history represents the initial condition of man as a life certainly poor, comparatively brutish, and short, but not in all respects nasty, and not at all solitary. The initial stage like

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19. See comments by R. Nisbet, *Social Change and History* (Oxford, 1969), p. 208.

20. A remark which so delighted Hume that he reproduced it without attribution, no doubt expecting the reference to be recognized.

all subsequent ones is a *social* condition. Ferguson quoted with approval Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*: "man is born in society and there he remains;" and he continued: ". . . both the earliest and the latest accounts . . . represent mankind assembled in troops and companies."<sup>21</sup> The accounts presented by the other Scots tally: man is seen in the primitive condition as already living in 'tribes,' 'families,' 'peoples,' 'nations,' or 'clans' (a rather revealing term for a Scotsman to use, much favored by Millar). Assertions like these, although couched in the past tense, were clearly intended to have an ontological rather than an historical import: they are an attempt to settle scores with Hobbes and Rousseau.

The initial stage, even though it is social and not solitary, was nonetheless generally viewed as one of privation. Any art, science, accomplishment, or sensibility which requires accumulated experience and inventions, extensive society, or personal security to bring it to perfection, is excluded from the initial condition *ex hypothesi*: it *could not have been* present. The same goes for anything not immediately apparent to a person unprovided with anything except the gifts of nature. But what precisely are the gifts of nature, and how may we know?

Nature, it was held, bestows on all men a desire for self-preservation, for sexual gratification, a desire to 'better their condition' and a certain modicum of sympathy, benevolence and/or pity. She also bestows some instruments for such passions, such as the capacity to compare, contrast, recall, and order experience ('reason'), and language, or at least its rudiments — a fertile field for conjectural history.<sup>22</sup> As part condition and part consequence of these, there is in man an appetite for society. (In Kames this still appears as part of a providential economy, whereby animals unable to survive singly are provided with an appetite for society.) Our knowledge of all this is derived from the principles of organization of the human frame:<sup>23</sup> it is supposed to be induced from what holds good of all men always and everywhere, for this is what the 'experimental method' demands.

As regards the judgment to be made about this condition, it did not call either for praise or condemnation, but on the whole the Scots were inclined to stress its limitations: "unsocial socia-

21. *Civil Society*, p. 3.

22. See L. Formigari, "Language and Society in the Later Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXV (1974), *passim*, and C. Berry, "Adam Smith's Considerations of Language," in the same volume.

23. This is stated most clearly by F. Hutcheson, the doyen of the school, in his *Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Glasgow, 1747), Book I, Ch. I.

bility," as Kant (who knew their writings well) called it, puts their view nicely.<sup>24</sup> The imagination and consequently the fellow-feeling and sensibility of man in this condition are very limited. Discouraging on the savages of America, Robertson stressed particularly the low regard in which women were held and the extreme cruelty used against enemies, irrespective of age or sex; at the same time, however, he enlarged on the savage's bravery and his fortitude in the face of torments.<sup>25</sup> And Ferguson, in whom a sympathy for barbarous people either underpinned or promoted an interesting set of reflections, insisted that "every age has its consolations as well as its sufferings,"<sup>26</sup> and the rest of his work is an elaboration of this view. For, according to Ferguson, barbarians, while their societies are far from orderly or comfortable, practise virtues lost in polished societies, among them a devotion to great deeds and heroism, fearlessness, ignorance of a self-interest distinct from the common, and an ardent love of liberty and equality, which, while it makes regular government and subordination impossible, at the same time obviates tyranny and encourages civic virtues.

As befits the singular acuteness of his comments about the concepts of 'happiness' and 'interest' deployed by his fellows, and about the prevailing psychology of which such concepts are the mainstay, Ferguson went on to deny outright the supposed spiritual emptiness of the savage condition: "We speak of art as distinguished from nature, but art itself is natural to man. He is in some manner the artificer of his own frame as well as his fortune, and is destined, from the first age of his being, to invent and contrive."<sup>27</sup> "It might be apprehended, that among rude nations, where the means of subsistence are procured with so much difficulty, man would in this condition give examples of the meanest and most mercenary spirit. The reverse, however, is true."<sup>28</sup> And he went on to point to the moral superiority of the savage over the civilized condition, at least in some respects and especially as regards the vicious consequences of the division of labor. This, however, was not the usual view; it was too close to Rousseau's noble savage, about which Robertson had earlier remarked derisively that some "have supposed that man arrives at his highest dignity

24. "Unwesellige Geselligkeit", I. Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1912), VIII.

25. *America*, pp. 93, 102-03, 116.

26. *Civil Society*, p. 105.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

and excellence long before he reaches a state of refinement, and in the rude simplicity of savage life, displays an elevation of sentiment, an independence of mind and a warmth of attachment, for which it is vain to search among the members of polished societies."<sup>29</sup>

The difference in description and valuation between Ferguson (the only Highlander and Gaelic-speaker of the group, as Forbes points out) and the rest suggests a reflection which can only be adumbrated here. A conjectural history illustrating (to use one of Smith's favorite phrases) "the natural, or rather the necessary" course of advancement from rudeness to polish, could serve as implicit justification for the sufferings of rude and barbarous Highlanders, as necessary concomitants of 'advancement.' If the belief in the long-term benefits to humanity and civility to be derived from the progress of industry, knowledge, and refinement was denied, as it was by Ferguson, the post-Culloden maltreatment of the Highlanders would appear as devoid of justification, especially to a set of men whose watch-words were sympathy, fellow-feeling, and the amiable virtues. Is there perhaps a hint of an uneasy conscience in Hume's rejection of Ferguson's views?<sup>30</sup>

#### IV. *The Evidence: (b) 'The Natural Progress of Society'*

The initial condition of society once delineated, the remainder of the task of conjectural history was clear. It was to exhibit the mechanisms, the chains of causes and effects, whereby men *might come*, or better, *typically do come* from rudeness to polish. What was aimed at was an account free from 'jumps.' (Nature does not make jumps and neither does the natural philosopher of society.) 'Jumps' would be any unacceptable connections, or unexplained transitions from one stage to the next: say, by the postulation of supernatural agency (only 'natural' connections were acceptable), or *dei ex machinis* (extra-ordinary agencies not specified in, or deducible from, the conditions and equipment of man at the relevant 'stage.') These are, as it were, the ground rules of conjectural history, and what is impressive is the Scots' consequentiality in adhering to these ground rules, and their ingenuity and sensi-

29. *America*, p. 92.

30. Hume's antipathy to Ferguson's *Essay*—"It is needless to enter into a detail, where almost everything appears objectionable," Letter 303 in J. Greig (ed.), *Hume's Letters*, (Vol. II)—has not been explained. E. Mossner's assertion that "... what he [Hume] found alien and untenable was surely the insistence upon the inevitability of progress, the principle of perfection," [*The Life of David Hume* (London, 1954), p. 543], is absurd.

tivity in bringing together the conjectural method and a wide knowledge of a past discerned in the documentary record.

The idea of unintended consequences accounts for much of what seems most attractive in Scottish conjectural history. This idea may have been itself partly suggested by the ground rules of conjectural history; it is at any rate entirely harmonious with them. (There is, however, no need to take issue with those who see in it a residue of providential history.) It is seen at its most striking in the rejection of the classical idea of the 'law-giver.' Such a rejection is perhaps not logically required by the ground rules (the law-giver had often been conceived as a merely human figure, and only the miraculous and the *deus ex machina* are positively excluded), but the law-giver may have become vulnerable by the tendency of antiquity, echoed by Rousseau, to invest him with quasi-divine attributes. What made such an agency as the law-giver entirely unpalatable, however, was his obtrusiveness and singularity in a chain of causes of an otherwise quite unremarkable and ordinary ('natural') sort, which was the *forte* of the Scots. The law-giver, in short, became redundant. Equally, one of the animating ideas of conjectural history, as it was of *The Spirit of the Laws*, was that all the customs, institutions, and beliefs of a people should be seen as interdependent, as constituting a system. If, in the social system, everything is to be understood as connected with everything else, then so too must the law-giver, and he too must partake of the quality of the other 'natural' causal agencies adduced in explanations. Hence Ferguson: "We are therefore to receive with caution, the traditionary histories of ancient legislators and founders of states . . . it is probable that the government (of Rome and Sparta) took its rise from the situation and genius of the people, not from the projects of single men; that the celebrated warriors and statesmen, who are considered as the founders of those nations, only acted a superior part among numbers who were disposed to the same institutions. . . ." <sup>31</sup> Instead, the dramatic changes in man's condition are now seen (to quote Ferguson once more), as having been brought about "with equal blindness to the future; nations stumble upon establishments which are indeed the results of human action but not the execution of any human design."<sup>32</sup>

31. *Civil Society*, p. 124. On this whole subject, D. Forbes, "Scientific Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar," *Cambridge Journal*, VII (1954), may be consulted with profit.

32. *Ibid.*, 22.

The law-giver, and for the same reason, the idea of 'design,' then, have to give way to a history of unintended consequences.<sup>33</sup> And thus conjectural history, curiously enough, leads to a heightening of the sense of anachronism, itself an indispensable part of the equipment of the modern historian. In 'empirical' history, this underwrites Hume's justly famous account of how puritans were instrumental in the establishment of liberty, without in the least intending it. In conjectural history, the argument takes the form of denying that certain things could have been thought at particular points in the life of society. Rude and savage nations cannot be monotheist, adjectives could not have been invented before nouns, benevolence to humanity at large is not a possible motive for savage people, and so forth. With the elimination from explanations of everything except ordinary ('natural') interests and motives, requiring no superhuman (or, indeed, above-average) largeness of views, genius, or nobility of purpose, the way was open for that detailed examination and exhibiting of the mechanisms by which change did or might have come about, which we are asserting to be one of the crowning glories of Scottish philosophy in this period.

Now, since conjectural history is concerned with the *typical* society or accomplishment, and its 'natural' (that is to say, typical) progress through the stages of advancement, there need be no correspondence between the *natural* course of progress and the *actual* 'empirical' history of a particular society, for the latter might be fraught with 'accidents.'<sup>34</sup> Often enough, however, the past recorded in documents and the sequences of conjectural history might tally well enough, as in the history of Greece and Rome, or of Europe since the 'feudal system.' In such cases the distinction between conjectural and 'empirical' history evaporated altogether. Given the philosophers' extraordinarily comprehensive view of what counted as 'primitive' or 'savage,'<sup>35</sup> parallels between empirical and conjectural sequences were common. And, as Stewart's account of conjectural history has led us to expect, *lacunae* in documentary

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33. Contrast, for example, Rousseau's lapse into this kind of talk when 'explaining' the 'origin' of government as the result of a "most profound plan" and a "design" (*Discourse*, pp. 204-05), and Voltaire's habitual talk about great men; see *Essai sur les Moeurs*, I, 251, 392, 495; and his assertion that it is "le génie et la fermeté d'un seul homme qui lutte contre les préjugés de la multitude," cited by R. Pomeau in his Preface to *Essai*, *ibid.*, xlv.

34. So much, of course, is clear from Stewart's comments quoted earlier.

35. Robertson, in his *History of the Reign of Charles V* (London, 1857), p. 339, thus regarded the time of Luther, and so did Hume that of Shakespeare, in his *History of Great Britain*, ed. D. Forbes (London, 1970), p. 247.

records might be filled by resort to conjectural history. Thus Robertson's *History of America* begins with a conjectural history of navigation and its relation to the progress of commerce and discovery, passes on to the empirical history of ancient and early modern navigations until the discovery of America, then continues with a conjectural history of the savage peoples of South and North America and then returns to the documentary history of the Europeans in the New World.

Where an articulated scheme of conjectural history *precedes* the organization of the documentary record into a coherence, mere fact can all too easily fall victim to how things, to quote Stewart once more, "*may have been* produced by natural causes," or worse still, *must have been* produced. This is what happened in the case of Comte and the two Mills,<sup>36</sup> who must in some sense be considered as the heirs of the Scottish philosophers.<sup>37</sup> But with the inventors of the method, a comprehensive and almost encyclopaedic knowledge of ancient history and literature, along with an abiding love of the classics and a fascination with anthropology, came *before* the ordering of that knowledge by means of conjectural history, and a detailed familiarity with the recorded past was never written off as a foible for pedants, or as something which conjectural history might simply replace. Thus, despite the doctrine of philosophy as teaching virtuous conduct and illustrating principles, one finds in all the writings of the Scots a purely academic and disinterested love of reconstructing and making sense of the past, and conjectural history could prove a valuable aid in this endeavor. This becomes apparent if we contrast, say, the sophisticated accounts of the 'feudal system' offered at length by Ferguson, Millar, and Robertson, and *en passant* by Smith, with what Rousseau, practising what the Scots only preached, had to say of 'feudalism': "that iniquitous and absurd system under which the human race is degraded and which dishonours the name of man," exhausts what he had to say on the subject.<sup>38</sup>

Conjectural history of course exacted a price. The method had perforce to give short shrift to any suggestion of spontaneity, inventiveness, initiative, or unusual gifts of prescience and insight, for these all savor of the inexplicable and the 'accidental.' It does not follow that such things cannot occur, nor indeed that they

36. J. Burrow, *Evolution and Society* (Cambridge, 1970), comments ably on James Mill.

37. Evidence for this may be found in W. Lehman, *John Millar of Glasgow* (Cambridge, 1960), Introduction.

38. J. J. Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social*, Book III, Ch. 15.

cannot have far-reaching effects, only that they will not feature in conjectural history. Some remarkable reflections of Hume seem to indicate an awareness of this: "What depends upon a few persons, is, in a great measure, to be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes; what arises from a great number may often be accounted for by determinate and known causes." And "to judge by this rule, the domestic and gradual revolutions of a state must be a more proper subject of reasoning and observation, than the foreign and violent." Thus, it is more easy to account for the rise and progress of commerce in any kingdom, than for that of learning."<sup>39</sup> The progress of some things, then, is more likely to be 'natural' than that of others. Adam Smith, however, was not inclined to make exceptions: even the progress of learning and 'philosophy' is to be explained by natural causes, namely by the division of labor. As might have been expected, given the Scots' lack of self-consciousness about conjectural history, the sort of past the method presupposes and is equipped to handle, comes to be seen as the past as it actually was.

#### V. *The Evidence: (c) Conjectural History and 'Economic Determinism'*

Little has been said so far, however, about the kind of mechanisms that were discerned as being at work. The interpretative literature commonly views the Scottish philosophers as 'economic determinists' or 'materialists,'<sup>40</sup> lacking only those names for themselves. Now if such terms have any meaning, it is because they presuppose a contrast between 'material' or 'economic' agencies or forces on the one hand, and 'ideational' and 'political' agencies on the other. To the latter, 'economic determinism' allots only a derivative, secondary or merely epiphenomenal status, while 'economic' or 'material' agencies are thought of as the real *explanans* of the nature of society and changes in society. But this distinction, and indeed the whole manner of thinking from which it derives, was quite alien to the Scots.

Conjectural history took as its subject matter all aspects of social living: the division of labor, men's ways of getting their livelihood, wealth, honor, the advancement of the arts (mechanical and fine) and sciences, the position of women in society, the condition of laborers, the political status of chieftains, warlords,

39. Hume, *Essays*, Part I, Essay XIV, p. 113.

40. This view is most charmingly stated in R. Meek's article cited in note 18 above.

kings, and the commercial classes, all were grist to its mill. But unlike Montesquieu, whose concerns encompassed all this, the Scots were as much concerned (to borrow Comte's terms) with 'social dynamics' as with 'social statistics'; great transformations in mores and accomplishments were as interesting to them as complex interdependencies. All of these, however, were explained in the same way as specific episodes in the conduct of individuals (for example, a commercial transaction, an individual's response to a change in his personal circumstances); the former simply meant larger numbers and wider ramifications of unintended consequences than the latter.

To explain the conduct of men, whether individuals or in groups, the Scots had recourse to a somewhat narrow range of motives which they deemed capable of serving as the springs of action. A representative selection of these is Hume's: "Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: These passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all actions and enterprises, which have ever been observed among mankind."<sup>41</sup> It is also true that a somewhat sardonic, debunking attitude reminiscent of Mandeville was not unheard of. But the Scots all allowed or, rather, insisted that at different stages of society different emphases and different priorities among the recognized mainsprings would prevail: no motive or interest, in their view, always and everywhere has an automatic priority over the others. Thus Smith's much-quoted remark — "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love"<sup>42</sup> — illustrates the sort of motives on which he ordinarily relied to explain "the nature and causes of the wealth of nations." But this did not deny, and was not intended to deny, that other, less 'material' sorts of motives might and did actuate people. Indeed, Smith gave pride of place among motives to the consideration of how one stands in the eyes of others, and he did so even in the *Wealth of Nations*, where, given the subject matter, a concentration on 'economic' motives would hardly surprise. In the *Theory*, this consideration is even more prominent.<sup>43</sup> Ferguson, in fact,

41. D. Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1902), Section 65.

42. A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Ch. I, p. 11.

43. See R. B. Lamb, "Adam Smith's System: Sympathy not Self-Interest," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXV (1974), *passim*.

went so far as to deny what the others *were* prepared to affirm, namely, that a preoccupation with private interests was a universal human characteristic; he thought it typical of commercial societies, but alien to the mentality of rude and barbarous people. And all our philosophers insisted that people's self-interest was wedded in diverse ways to the interests of those with whom they (as we say) identified; Smith's moral psychology was particularly subtle on the point. What was felt to be lacking in most people was not good will, sympathy or benevolence *per se* — these were commonly reckoned among man's natural attributes — but rather the imagination and vision which would extend the range of recipients of such good will and sympathy. Savages, the common people, contemporary working men, and country people in general were thought particularly deficient in these respects. In short, the Scots were profoundly sensitive to the 'empire of opinion.'<sup>44</sup> Given their view of the determinants of human conduct, there was no room or need for a doctrinal position about the relative importance of 'ideational' (or 'superstructural') factors versus 'economic' (or 'material') ones — consciousness versus being.

It may be added parenthetically that their typical modes of explanation did not require the postulate of the isolated, rational calculator of his own advantage, of which they are sometimes accused. Their explanations of human conduct were 'individualistic' in the sense that the unit of explanation was the individual actor, and explanation was in terms of motives, interests, or passions; the Scots' explanations were not individualistic in the sense of being designed to exclude what had not been invented, namely collectivism or holism. And as a welcome consequence of their approach, we find little recourse either to those abstractions with which the *philosophes* were wont to cover their incomprehension ('superstition,' 'fanaticism,' 'intolerance'), or to the personifications, -isms, and impersonal forces got up as causal agencies that are the stock-in-trade and bane of later social science.

Nor is there any evidence of a disposition, such as might be expected in 'materialists' or 'economic determinists,' to minimize the significance of political as opposed to economic circumstances in conjectural history accounts of society and social transformations; still less, to allot to economic circumstances an automatic causal priority.

There was indeed widespread agreement, Ferguson being the

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44. The phrase seems to be Burke's, but the thought is the Scots'. But see Voltaire, *Essai sur les Moeurs*, I, 315: 'L'opinion, qui gouverne le monde. . . .'

notable exception, with Robertson's view that "the private and domestic situation of mankind, is the chief circumstance which forms their [sic] character and becomes the great source of their happiness and misery."<sup>45</sup> This, however, was not because political arrangements and circumstances were thought to be of no account, but simply because their effects were felt via the medium of the 'private and domestic situation' in which most people *de facto* spend most of their lives. No Scottish philosopher was prepared to assert anything comparable to the view that the character of the political institutions of a society is merely derivative from its economic arrangements.<sup>46</sup> In fact there was again no reason to take a doctrinal stand on the matter at all.

In the first stage of society, politics does not figure prominently *ex hypothesi*, the initial condition being identified as lacking, among other things, political institutions of any but the most casual and *ad hoc* kind. Like other 'inventions,' political institutions require an accumulation of experience, there being now no room for law-givers operating *in vacuo*. As for the final, polished condition of society, the Scots were not in agreement about the place of politics. Smith, inclined more than the rest to minimize the scope of political activity in commercial societies, nonetheless considered political functions critical to his "simple and natural plan of liberty and equality." Hume came to attach increasing importance to firm government in later life.<sup>47</sup> Ferguson valued political activity on the part of the citizenry as the exercise of republican virtue; Millar valued it as a preservative for the rights and liberty of 'the people'; Smith was inclined to see it as energy which could be more profitably (in every sense) expended on private matters. And none of them voiced the view that politics was incapable of autonomous efficacy; on the contrary, even Smith distrusted governmental activity precisely because of its potency, at least for evil. As regards the stages between the beginning and the end of the 'natural course of advancement,' the progress of government occupies a central place in conjectural history. The improvement of government, the distinction of ranks, habits of obedience and legality, and the con-

45. W. Robertson, "The Situation of the World at the Time of Christ's Appearance" (a sermon, published in 1755) in *Works*, I, lxxxii.

46. The closest approximation to such a view is Robertson's somewhat extravagant assertion: "In every inquiry concerning the operations of men when united together in society, the first object of attention should be their mode of subsistence. Accordingly as that varies their laws and policy must be different." *Ibid.*, II, 104. The context of these remarks was however the 'savage' peoples of America; they were not programmatic.

47. G. Giarrizzo, *David Hume Politico e Storico* (Turin, 1962), *passim*. See esp. Part I, Section III.

sequent improvements in personal security and ordered liberty are in all accounts seen as important both in themselves and as pre-conditions for all social advancement.

#### VI. *The Evidence: (d) The Final Stage of Conjectural History*

It would be inappropriate to terminate even as brief a survey as this without a few comments on the *terminus ad quem* of conjectural history. The Scots, with Ferguson once more a conspicuous exception, were in general inclined to applaud the progress of arts, sciences, civility, and polish. What distinguishes them from nineteenth-century progressivism is an unwillingness to think of the process thus described as either inevitable or destined to continue automatically. Suspensions of advancement, or even regressions are entirely possible, given the operation of peculiar causes or combinations of causes. Thus in Robertson's view, the inundations of the barbarians had produced a "second infancy" and Europe "had to begin anew its career in improvement, science and civility."<sup>48</sup> The conviction that civilization was in decline in his own day grew on Hume in later life.<sup>49</sup> And a similar note is struck in Smith's numerous somber reflections on the 'stationary state' or still worse, the 'declining' one.<sup>50</sup> Ferguson's acute sensitiveness to the price to be paid for advancement in the arts and civilization is evident enough. And even Millar, the most radical and Whiggish of the group, nowhere used conjectural history to underpin a belief that the course of advancement is automatic or bound to win through.

Thus for the Scots, 'later' did not necessarily mean 'higher' or 'better,' and we find in their writings no attempt, for example, to prove that the 'Middle' or 'Dark' ages were in some respect superior to what went before, such as was made by Turgot. The verdict of Hume, Robertson, Ferguson, and Millar, that the destruction of the Roman Empire by freedom-loving barbarians is in some respects to be applauded, was a political judgment and not an attempt to appease the demands of some preformulated pattern of unilinear progress.

The position that the Scots actually held was, in fact, implicit in their premises. Most of the capacities and accomplishments of men require the succession of generations and the accumulation of experience and reflection for their unfolding. It follows that in

48. *America*, p. 9.

49. Giarrizzo, *Hume*.

50. R. Heilbroner, "The Paradox of Progress: Decline and Decay in the 'Wealth of Nations,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXV (1973).

the absence of 'accidents' or 'artificial' interference, a later, more polished and civilized condition makes possible broader sympathies, larger opportunities for satisfactions, and a richer and more diversified life. In this sense natural change is also progress and advancement. But there is nothing here to preclude there being a price to be paid for advancement: some such prices are simple concomitants of 'the progress in improvements.'<sup>51</sup> And neither is there anything to preclude the possibility of degeneration or reversals, since the mechanisms by which these might occur, and have occurred, are perfectly recognizable, and 'natural.' There is simply no footing here for any optimistic view about inevitable or limitless progress.<sup>52</sup> The same insensible changes occasioned by the cumulative effects of private, short-sighted decisions which operate for advancement, might operate, had operated, and did operate to bring about setbacks and total reversals. The wise man might indeed recognize the signs from afar, but the Scots were far from postulating such wisdom in the mass of mankind. The 'natural' process for these Scots is still the process of birth, infancy, maturity, and decline.<sup>53</sup> And at that point the conjectural story might start again, though not perhaps absolutely *ab ovo*. All the secondary sources insist on the marked regard in which classical Stoicism was held by the Scots philosophers: here was the Stoic story of the world in a new guise, with the conflagration terminating the cosmic aeon replaced by insensible gradation.

### Conclusion

It remains for us to consider what made the employment of conjectural history congenial to the Scots *philosophes*. And here we may distinguish between the uses to which conjectural history was put, and the rationale of the method. As to the former, it is enough to recapitulate what has been said. It was a commonplace of *philosophe* thought to view 'science' (or 'philosophy' — the words were used interchangeably), as having two aspects: it was both inquiry into the nature of things, and it laid the foundations for technology. The same was expected of the science of man, and thus of conjectural history, the Scots' characteristic manner of practising that science: its business was to provide understanding;

51. Robertson, *America*, p. 82.

52. See, for example, the extreme reservations expressed by Hume to Turgot about the latter's "agreeable and laudable, if not too sanguine" progressivism. Greig, *Letters*, II, Letter 417.

53. See Robertson, *America*, p. 90, where he casually refers to man's "progress through the different stages of society, as he gradually advances from the infant state of civil life towards its maturity *and decline*." (my italics).

understanding was in terms of causes and effects; and a knowledge of causes and effects, in the right hands, was power. We may, perhaps, add that to present something as founded on natural philosophy was also a powerful persuasive device.

Our Scots, then, were happy enough to draw useful lessons for political conduct out of their conjectural histories. What cannot be maintained is that this exhausts the uses to which conjectural history was put. Indeed, unless one is committed in advance to the view that to have discovered a political intention or implication in some body of thought is to have discovered its essence, one cannot help but be struck by the disinterested love of creating intellectual order out of multiplicity which informs so much of the employment of conjectural history. The Scots may no doubt all be described as utilitarians in some sense, but their writings evidence a most enlarged and catholic view of what might count as useful knowledge. Explaining what history is (history *en philosophe*, of course), Hume did not trouble even to mention any practical purpose: "Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour."<sup>54</sup> We may notice, too, Smith's characteristically psychologistic rationale for intellectual activity in general. The mind, he argued, experiences a sense of discomfort and uneasiness when confronted by the appearance of chaos; such discomfort is dissipated and tranquillity restored when chaos has been shown not to have been real, but merely apparent chaos after all. And this is done by the discovery of "connecting principles of nature," which is the business of the philosopher.<sup>55</sup> Conjectural history, by constructing paradigmatic sequences of events which exhibited such connecting principles of nature, ordered the chaos. It has to be concluded, that the employment of conjectural history was at least as much for the sake of trying to make sense of the human world, as for the practical purpose of making that world more controllable.

It remains now to consider why this particular method, and not some other, was thought conducive to the discovery of truth. And as the preceding account should have made clear, conjectural history was entirely compatible with ideas then prevailing about correct explanation. Its starting point, the rude and savage initial

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54. *Human Understanding*, section 65.

55. "Essays on Philosophical Subjects", *Early Writings*; see esp. pp. 32-52.

condition, was thought empirically ascertainable. The same was true of the *terminus ad quem*, the 'polished and civilized' condition, for it is the condition in which we find ourselves. The rest is a matter of tracing chains of cause and effect between them. And the account actually given is satisfactory when a *possible* and *natural* linkage of cause and effect is presented. And, as Hobbes had already taught more than a century before, causal explanations cannot be more than possible explanations.

What is more, the method was coherent with the programmatic implications of Montesquieu's assertion: "J'ai posé les principes, et j'ai vu les cas particuliers s'y plier comme d'eux mêmes; les histoires de toutes les nations n'en être que des suites; et chaque loi particulière liée avec une autre loi, ou dépendre d'une autre plus générale."<sup>53</sup> The Scots unlike Montesquieu, were now looking for 'laws of social dynamics' as well as 'laws of social statics,' and they also repudiated Montesquieu's Cartesian presuppositions. But they nonetheless expected to find social laws or principles, few in number, which would reduce the multifariousness of the merely phenomenal to order and intelligibility.

Conjectural history, then, seemed to the Scots to conform to the demands of the 'experimental method.' The idea of experimental method then current, especially in its more strident formulations,<sup>57</sup> is indeed liable to all the objections raised against inductivism, and we may say that the Scots were 'indolently inductive,' though less so than, say, Helvetius. But conjectural history did seem close enough to the kind of thing that was looked for in a science. It did not involve the postulate of a state of nature not encountered in experience, and it did seem to be borne out by the anthropological material, although, as Nisbet has shown,<sup>58</sup> what counted as evidence for the conjectural schemes had already been pre-selected and pre-digested by the stadial schema of historical advancement or progress of society, which itself was not vulnerable to any conceivable kind of historical evidence. But this error was by no means peculiar to the Scots, and their way with evidence *was* generally far from cavalier. And thus conjectural history seemed to promise and deliver all that could be required of a scientific method.

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56. Montesquieu, Preface to *De l'Esprit Des Loix* in *Oeuvres Completes* (Pleiade Edition), II, 229.

57. See the "manifesto of the Empirical Method," (Forbes); Ferguson, *Civil Society*, pp. 2-3.

58. R. Nisbet, *Social Change and History*.