The English Enlightenment. Roy Porter 2000 Penguin books London.

Subject:

The Enlightenment is usually considered as a continental phenomenon, principally French, promoting atheism, republicanism and materialism and which culminated in the French Revolution in 1789. Roy Porter who is Professor in the Social History of Medicine at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, argues in this book that the 18th century in Great Britain was also a foment of enlightened thinking which has had a profound influence not only in this country in the following two centuries but also on enlightened thinking in Europe and America.

Summary:

It is difficult to do justice to the author in a summary of a book of over 480 pages and a further 200 pages of bibliography. It is a big read but made enjoyable by an easy style and a clear love of playing with words. Porter obviously enjoys having a dig at some of the more narrow minded approaches to the Enlightenment taken by previous studies particularly when they emanate from Oxford.

"Anglophone developments have also been skipped over thanks to the intellectualist fallacy dear to academics who… prize profundity above all and rate dead thinkers on an abstrucity scale."

He suggests that "England's modernisers had no stomach for indigestible scholastic husks; they were not ivory towered academics but men and women of letters who made their pitch in the metropolitan marketplace and courted the public…" and quotes J. H. Plumb who suggests that ideas acquired dynamism when they become social attitudes and this was happening in England during the 18th century.

Nor does he claim that the Enlightenment in England, any more than on the continent, was a coherent uniform development. It was more a variety of responses up and down the country to the philosophical ideas promoted by the likes of Hobbes, Locke, Newton, Paine, Bentham and Wollstonecraft. One feature of enlightened opinion in Britain was the attempt to achieve inclusiveness and various strategies were tried. One involved philanthropy where the needy could be provided for through charitable schools, hospitals, dispensaries, asylums and other charitable giving. Another strategy lay in displays of social openness which astonished foreign visitors. Porter claims that this led to a deeper transformation with the rise and triumph of lay and secular public opinion, the fourth estate and the information society.

The Chapters

The Birth of an ideology:

The first chapter describes the historical and political situation at the beginning of the 18th century brought about by the "Glorious Revolution" when in 1688 William of Orange in a bloodless coup deposed James II and thus heralded a period of religious and political toleration which extended through most of the following century. Locke had been living in exile abroad and was able to return. His views on government provided a prototype for enlightened thinkers. He spelt out theories of government accountability and the right of resistance which still hold currency today. Porter also describes the development of the many Societies which promoted both the arts and sciences as well as the development of theatre and museums.

Clearing away the rubbish:

In order to allow the progression of enlightened thinking there was much rethinking of old ideas particularly a wish to question authorities, even the Bible. The new sciences of astronomy and physics were already challenging the widely held view of man being at the centre of the universe. Hobbes was re-drawing human nature with man described as a machine with thoughts; and feelings no more than stirrings in the sense organs producing in turn those brainwaves called ideas. Locke developed his model of the mind as one maturing through experience from ignorance to knowledge.
Both philosophers were impressed by the underlying philosophy of the newly formed Royal Society in its commitment to observation and experiment deriving from Bacon's empiricism.

Print Culture:

This century saw the democratisation of the printed word with a profusion of pamphlets as well as the start of newspapers, periodicals and novels. Of particular importance, Porter suggests were The Tatler and Spectator whose editors aimed to educate the public in enlightened views as well as refining tastes and polishing manners! But there were also books on cooking, history and the sciences.

Rationalising religion:

Although voices declared it a time of unbelief, Porter says that Christianity in Britain "remained snug until the Victorian honest doubters and the "Origin of Species"". But even that, he claims, is a simplistic view. This was a time when Deism became influential (see wikipedia definition below) and as a result the confident role of churches, both Established and Non-conformist, was undermined by personal religion. He states.

"Enlightened minds ceased to equate religion with a body of commandments, graven in stone, dispensed through scripture, accepted on faith and policed by the church. Belief was becoming a matter of private judgment, for individual reason to adjudicate within the multi religionism sanctioned by statutory toleration. The Anglican Church, meanwhile, lost its monopolies over education and the enforcement of morals. As religion became subjected to reason, Christianity ceased to be a given and became a matter of analysis and choice. And, for some, that meant scepticism or rejection."

He suggests that as the 17th century drew to its close, a call that was heard ever louder was that religion and reason were one and must pull together. Locke concurred with this. In other words

"Enlightenment in Britain took place within, rather than against Protestantism…Locke had taught that the only safe church was a voluntary society denied the power of the sword; for the enlightened, this disarming of the priesthood was a decisive step towards exposing religion, like everything else, to the rays of reason and the salutary power of criticism."

It took Hume to demolish Deist claims that a knowledge of God could be derived from the facts and open the doors of Atheism.

The Culture of Science:

The Royal Society was founded in 1662 and its promotion of the new sciences, or natural philosophy as it was called, was undoubtedly helped by a number of outstanding natural philosophers who wove this new science into a progressive philosophy. Newton was, of course, pre-eminent but this was also the time of Robert Boyle and Joseph Priestley. Science was popularised by lectures in coffee houses and theatres in London and this spread to the provinces. As a direct consequence, an instrument trade flourished with English clocks and watches, barometers, thermometers, air pumps and other instruments being leading examples. Astronomy overtook astrology and yet William Herschel was confident about finding the inhabitants on the moon!
Porter states that "science's key contribution to enlightened thinking lay in its underwriting belief in intellectual advance and it's staking a claim to be the gold standard of positive knowledge."

Anatomising Human Nature:

This chapter discusses a pressing question for enlightened thinkers, that of self-identity. What did it mean to be an "I"? It seems there was no single enlightened view. With a view of the human condition based on the Scriptures displaced by rational religion there was a need to resolve the human condition. Enlightened thinkers felt it was no longer profitable to fit man into a scenario of "sin and Satan, faith and the fall", nor profitable to consider the struggle between good and evil. What was need were objective studies of the human faculties, motives and behaviours.
On human behaviour, Francis Hutcheson in Glasgow had a distinctly utilitarian viewpoint. "The action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers." However it was tempered by his view that man's capacity for virtue was God given. Nonetheless Hutcheson's philosophy might be considered an early foray into the study we now call psychology. It was Hume in '*A Treatise on Human Nature'* who was the great advocate of exploring man scientifically. The subtitle of his book was 'An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects.'. Hume sought to establish a rigorous account of the mind derived from careful and exact experiments. He held that our knowledge of the self and of the world was limited to perceptions (impressions) derived from observation and introspection. All legitimate ideas or thoughts

were to be traced back to sense impressions or to internal impressions or feelings and to associations derived there from. Causal powers could not be discovered and one must submit merely to 'constant conjunctions'. The logical consequence of this was that no fixed self was knowable or indeed there at all. Thus there was no such demonstrably constant unity as a 'person', merely atomised impressions of continuity.

By contrast, David Hartley, who studied at Cambridge, (when forced to give up his fellowship because he married, went on to train in medicine.) denied that a man was innately moral. He held that a man was a machine programmed for happiness and man's feelings and values were constructed, arising out of mental activity. He suggested that educational and environmental influences should be organised so as to secure the association of pleasure with socially desirable objects. It might never elevate man to altruism but he was certainly capable of benevolence. Porter feels that Hartley's thinking proved critical to the late Enlightenment science of man.

"It gave learning theory and the moral sense firm naturalistic moorings, and, though he was himself devout, his unification of sensation, motion, association and volition within a mechanistic theory of consciousness and action pointed to the secularisation of the concept of utility. His was a model which came to be prized as the fountain head of psychological, biological and social truth, providing the stimulus for the associationist tradition in psychology and pedagogics. In addition, Hartley's conjectural physiology of the nervous system offered prototypes influential in neurophysiology ."

The science of politics:

Britain had been through a turbulent time politically with Charles I resting his authority on the Divine Right of Kings and his neck on the executioner's block. Protestant austerity under Cromwell lead to the Restoration but Catholic leaning James II prompted plotters to welcome the protestant William of Orange in 1688. In 1715 and 1745 there were Scottish based uprisings in support of James II son and grandson (the Old and Young Pretenders). George II was ready to flee the country as Bonnie Prince Charlie invaded England in 1745. Little wonder that philosophers considered the issue of government and the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

Desaguliers, a Fellow of the Royal Society produced *The Newtonian System of the World: The Best Model of Government* in 1728. He suggested that the State was opened to scientific analysis although, in practice, politics remained "a cockpit of rival rhetorics". Freedom did appear to be a central plank of enlightened political thinking and this is not surprising after the Stuart kings seemed bent on extinguishing it. It prompted Locke to write his *Two Treatises on Government* rebutting passive obedience and the Divine Right of Kings and repudiating the 'might is right' dictum of Hobbes.

England was the land of the free and a foreign visitor commented that the 'sentiment of liberty and the ever active protection of the laws are the cause why the common people showed little consideration even for persons in office'. Already the infant newspapers were claiming the freedom of the press in order to protect liberty. In addition enlightened thinkers not only wanted to understand the world but to influence it and in this regard the

editors of The Tatler and the Spectator were influential. Thousands of these magazines formed the topic of conversation in coffee houses and clubs. In effect, Mr Spectator, the man about town, was the first media man. These publications sold the young idea of lifestyle politics and pedalled hope. After 1714 there was a prolonged period of peace and prosperity in which trade and agriculture increased and there was considerable cultivation in the arts, sciences and philosophy. All conspired to give the illusion of progress and improvement. David Hume addressed the implications of economic improvement advocating that luxury was a good thing because it ensured motives for obedience to government and also it created a desirable environment for social life. Hume suggested that the good life was to be practised not in the great world of affairs with amongst family and friends. He held that beliefs and actions should be tempered by self-criticism, detachment and desire to cultivate domestic affection and friendship. These ideas were developed by Adam Smith in a theory of interpersonal adjustment deriving from sympathy, in other words, putting ourselves in the shoes of others. Smith prized relationships between independently minded individuals and aimed to show how these relationships could acquire a sense of justice, public responsibility and a sense of personal identity for the individual. Porter summarises that "enlightened the political discourse vindicated commercial society by planting it in the soil of British liberties. Addison and Steele (the editors of the Tatler and the Spectator) undertook the popularising mission. Hume and Smith provided the theory."

Secularising:

Over the 18th century pre-Reformation religiosity gave way to increasing secularisation. As Malthus put it, incontestable acts of God like war and famine had, after all, nothing to do with the devil but followed automatically from the numerical imbalance of man's appetites for food and sex. Progressive doctors urge that episcopally licensed ignorant midwives be abandoned in favour of medically trained obstetricians. swaddling should be abandoned and feeding should be by breast not artificially. In 1769 William Buchan published *Domestic Medicine* which expounded to the common reader an enlightened philosophy of health to be pursued through reason, temperance, hygiene and heeding natures laws. Medicine thus affords a clear-cut case, one among many, of the practical application of enlightened thinking, confirming that it was not mere vacuous coffee house chatter but an action philosophy. At the other end of life, the enlightened sought to demystify death by promoting frankness towards physical annihilation. Porter argues that for rational Christians, Deists, sceptics and atheists alike there was an onslaught upon the theology of eternal punishment which was designed to terrorise the credulous and so to maximise ecclesiastical power and profit. He then goes on to discuss attitudes to witchcraft and the supernatural, issues which were difficult, if not impossible, to be subjected to scientific inquiry. Enlightened thinkers sought to rationalise the life in terms of a model of natural order which replaced an active God with an active man.

Modernising:

Myth had become the chosen vehicle for imparting religious or moral doctrines. Initially, rationalist thinking was hostile to nonfactual accounts but Adam Ferguson one of Scotland's enlightened thinkers acknowledged that myths afforded windows onto bygone mentalities. Porter then discusses the development of enlightened thinking in Wales, Ireland and

Scotland. He puts forward a case for denying a distinct Scottish enlightenment despite so many of the leading thinkers coming from north of the border. He goes onto discuss the attitudes towards a political system such as existed in Sparta and how it related to the 18th century. Modernism was trumpeted despite Adam Smith acknowledging that harm as well as good would come of it. The views of other Scottish thinkers are discussed in relation to language, the law and economics. Porter finally admits that " living in a rapidly changing society with a strong university tradition, it is little surprise that the Scots were so prominent in that movement (enlightenment), contributing particularly clear and coherent philosophies of progress.

Happiness:

Chapter 11 explores how the Enlightenment thinkers embraced the pursuit of temporal happiness. Hobbes in *Leviathan* had promoted man as being oriented primarily towards avoiding pain. Mandeville pushed a more cynical egoism and despite challenges to these views, there was gradual acceptance that self-fulfilment rather than denial should be embraced, being inherent in human nature and beneficial to society. The principle of self-interest was the universal spring of human action according to Sir James Steuart, he judged:

"that the best way to govern society and to engage everyone to conduct himself according to a plan is for the statesman to form a system of administration, the most consistent possible with the interest of every individual, and never to flatter himself that his people will be brought to act from any other principle and private interest.".

These principles allowed the leisure and pleasure industries to expand with pleasure gardens springing up all over London particularly notable being Vauxhall Gardens. Paid sportsmen emerged, cricket became a spectator sport as did horseracing with the sports journalism increasing the interest. Hedonism of any sort was pursued and the prints of Hogarth are a contemporary record of much of this.

From good sense to sensibility:

This chapter discusses the aesthetics of the age including the development of the novel. There was a debate over whether novels were useful for conveying instruction or whether they were debauching. There was worry that readers at large, especially empty headed young women, would empathise with the characters and plots of fiction so much that they would confuse them with reality and hence be led astray. The chapter traces the Enlightenment's confusion between life and art, reality and fiction. Emotional individualism came to the fore which was a new and crucial phase in the dynamic enlightened quest for truth and freedom.

Nature:

Porter opens this chapter with the statement that the key Enlightenment concept was nature. He acknowledges nonetheless that it is difficult to define. He quotes Simon Shama. " Although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible… landscape is the work of the mind.". What passes these days in

England for nature-the checkerboard fields, hawthorn hedgerows and coppices-is largely the product of Enlightenment agribusiness, landscape gardening and enclosure of the Common land. The biblical view held less sway and the view that the world was in decay began to be replaced by a more optimistic view where nature could be tamed for the benefit of man. It was felt that the globe was self-sustaining and self repairing. These views encouraged considerable experimentation in agricultural improvement and many agricultural societies were formed at this time. Adam Smith endorsed these developments by stating 'the land constitutes by far the greatest, the most important, and the most durable part of the wealth of every extensive country.' In this area, developments were undoubtedly patrician with many of the nobility developing their estates and taming nature with the help of landscape designers such as capability Brown and Humphry Repton.

Did the mind have sex?

The 18th century saw a considerable development away from the very patriarchal and male 17th century. English women were noted throughout Europe for their remarkable public independence and nearly all the best-selling novelists by the turn-of-the-century were women. By contrast, there were some extraordinary social experiments exemplified by Thomas Day who selected a 12-year-old girl from an orphanage to be schooled into the perfect wife, living in domestic retirement, despising fashion and devoting herself to husband and offspring. Needless to say the experiment failed. More influential than such experiments were the positive images of women promoted by Addison and Steele in The Tatler and Spectator, whose writings advanced a civilising mission for the sex. Enlightened women who talked and got involved in politics did go out on a limb and they were widely attacked. Most women knew that they had too much to lose by emulating men in dirty feels like politics by so doing they would see the moral and spiritual superiority derived from unblemished virtue. So that amongst most women the prime call was not for socio-sexual reorganisation but for the acceptance of the mental and spiritual equality and the right to education.

Education: a panacea?

There was a long held view that children were naturally corrupt and as enlightened thinking deemed that human nature was improvable and looked to a brighter future, a new model of the child and a fresh vision of the potential of education was necessary. Locke provided that. He likened the infant mind to white paper, or wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases. He advocated that rote learning was useless, that curiosity counted. He said that education's goal was virtue and that virtue lay in the eye of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our desires, when reason does not authorise them. These views were enormously influential. In parallel with this philosophy, the nonconformists were ardent educators. Dissenting academies won the praise of Priestley as the ideal form of higher education especially as their atmosphere grew increasingly liberal. Rather than a system designed to educate men for the church and boys now needed to be trained for an active and civil life. Reform in Britain's universities was confined largely to Scotland. Oxford was picked out for particular criticism even by its own alumni such as Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and Edward Gibbon.

Child orientated books became common and, reflecting enlightened views, these books entertained and edified all at once.

This model of the malleable child, awaiting improvement, was readily transferred by enlightened thinkers to classes of people thought not fully responsible. And thus the Enlightenment took up the cause of the individual or minority, or those oppressed by bigotry or superstition. Emancipation was attempted through the Jew Bill in 1753 and enlightened minds could be proud of opening up the globe in a way that promoted the unification of mankind. Anti-colonial thinking was strong and it paved the way for the abolition of the slave trade even though this was eventually led by the Evangelical lobby.

The vulgar:

The attitudes of enlightened elites towards the populace at large were profoundly ambiguous. Whilst on the one hand proclaiming fraternity there were complaints about the irksome proximity of odorous beings, who were less than fully rational. Even Locke was condescending stating 'the greatest part cannot know and therefore they must believe' in effect saying religion for the rational and superstition for the simple. The enlightened liked to imagine a perfected populace but, in the short run, people were portrayed mainly as problems. However the belief in progress suggested that solutions would be found to social problems. Prostitution was widely debated within a framework, not of personal guilt and atonement, but as a social problem begging an engineered solution. Poverty was a major problem. There was a role for rational philanthropy at a time when demands on the parish Poor Laws were increasing. The solution proposed was the provision of workhouses but unfortunately they failed to deliver. Some believed that capitalism was producing poverty and this might be inevitable and even advantageous as it would create an incentive to labour. Others began to worry about overpopulation most notably Thomas Malthus who in *An Essay on the Principle of Populations* calculated that with a geometrical increase in population but with an arithmetical increase in food supplies, the implication was misery in the form of famine, war or pestilence.

The pursuit of wealth:

In this era, a consumer society emerged and in order for this market society to flourish it needed a credible analysis of economic activity. Earlier times had promoted mercantilism which took good housekeeping as its model. This was overturned by Adam Smith in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.* Porter states that what is significant in both Hume and Smith is the depoliticisation of the hallowed idea of the public good. For them individual happiness and material well-being had moved centre stage, and identification of the 'good' as some towerring political or moral virtue had lost its purchase. He argues that the Enlightenment piloted a transition from homo civilis to homo economicus, which involved the rationalisation of selfishness and self-interest as enlightened ideology, the privatisation of virtue and the de-moralization of luxury, pride, selfishness and avarice.

Reform:

The late Enlightenment mounted an attack on 'old corruption' which Porter describes as that combination of aristocratic capitalism, landed in commercial power, title and wealth, and backed by a monster oligarchic state. In describing the nature of this attack Porter devotes several pages to Joseph Priestley who he feels has been largely ignored by most historians of the Enlightenment. He trained in the Presbyterian ministry but was theologically unorthodox abandoning belief in the Trinity and even questioning the divinity of Christ. Whilst pursuing an unorthodox career as a minister he was busy making inquiries into electricity and investigating oxygen. In the context of this chapter, his *Essay on the first principles of government* elaborated the distinction between two sorts of liberty, civil and political. Civil liberty called for, amongst other things, full toleration for Roman Catholics and atheists as well as Dissenters. His liberalism which preached freedom from state tyranny, priests and superstition, went with an endorsement of new institutions-factories, jails, schools and hospitals-institutions which were meant to instruct and discipline. Inevitably he became a supporter of the French Revolution. Jeremy Bentham is also discussed in this chapter. He was a staunch individualist and atheist and was the main advocate of a utilitarian philosophy. His lengthy life was single-mindedly devoted to reform particularly of the law. Bentham believed that power had ensconced itself by mystification. Monarchy, the church, the peerage and the professions-all had cooked up self-serving mythologies: divine right, the ancient constitution, theology, the ritual, precedent.

Progress:

"History is progressive, proclaimed enlightened activists in an ever swelling chorus, as they crested the wave in an age of improvement."

Thus does Porter open this chapter. He notes that the Enlightenment brought the birth of science fiction and the futurological novel. Erasmus Darwin suggested that social progress was underwritten by biological evolution at large. The public got hooked on novelty. Landscapes, gardens, manufactures, manners, taste, art and literature -- all were constantly talked up as improving. Capitalist agriculture was cast as rational and farming became managed as a form of manufacturing. Technology became headline news. The entrepreneur was hailed as the exemplar of modern energy. Robert Owen was one such example who combined this with social reform urging a rational social rebuilding on the basis of universal education. Porter devotes a few pages to Erasmus Darwin grandfather of Charles Darwin and summarises his contribution " Darwin's evolutionism provided the British Enlightenment's most sublime theory of boundless improvement… his vision of evolution had potent ideological implications. His writings amount to an early and full vindication and industrial Society, rationalised through a social biology". Porter ends the chapter by describing progress proving to be the ultimate Enlightenment gospel. It kindled optimism and pointed to a program: the promise of a better future would expose and highlight whatever remained wrong in the present it was a vision of hope, the doctrine of change… Darwin and his peers presented a man centred view of man making himself.. God had become a distant cause of causes; what counted was man acting in nature.

The revolutionary era: 'modern philosophy':

Enlightened thinkers valued liberty and therefore it was argued that if they supported the real principles of the 1688 glorious Revolution then they must embrace the French Revolution. Edmund Burke disagreed with this view arguing that change must come gradually and it must be consensual. There were many publications supporting the French Revolution until Pitt, fearing that revolution might spread across the Channel, issued a proclamation against seditious writings. He also set up spy networks to report on Radical Societies considered a threat to Government stability. When France declared war on Britain, the Enlightened found themselves in a cleft stick. The war also gave the government enough excuse to reduce civil liberties considerably through the Seditious Meetings Act and the Treasonable Practices Act. Fortunately, apart from in Ireland, revolutionary fervour died down Britain largely as a result of the war with France.

Foremost amongst those advocating liberty was Thomas Paine. Porter briefly describes his life and discusses his book *Rights of Man* published in 1791. Thomas Paine advocated that all men are born equal and with the equal natural rights. Upon these rights civil rights were grounded, which existed for the same Lockean reason as did civil society, because not all natural rights could be safeguarded by the individual alone. Some, such as freedom of religion, remained untouched in civil society; others, such as the right to judge and acting one's own case, were relinquished in exchange for justice. Legitimate government rested upon popular sovereignty. In the second part of his book Paine painted a picture of an energetic state meeting the needs of the people: relief for a quarter of a million poor families, universal elementary education, family allowances for children under 14, old-age pensions, maternity benefits, funeral allowances, workshops for youngsters and public works for London's poor. To pay for this Paine looked to military cuts and a graduated income tax. The civilised society was the one which could say: 'my poor are happy'. Paine's second book, *The Age of Reason*, was full of indignation against the Old Testament's cruel and arbitrary God. He railed against the established Church and argued that as soon as priestcraft was destroyed, the present age could thereafter be called the Age of Reason. Although hugely popular as the voice of Hope, to others he was the devil incarnate. His books were proscribed and the booksellers who distributed them were imprisoned.
William Godwin took this enlightened thinking to its logical conclusion seeking not the reform of government but its abolition. He argued that in a necessitarian universe, dominated by a chain of events it was folly to hold malefactors responsible for their crimes: society should be so reconstituted and people so re-educated that they had no motive for committing them. He extolled the very soul of Enlightenment -- ceaseless criticism, self examination and perpetual vigilance -- for the unexamined life was not worth living. Franklin had suggested that the mind will one day become omnipotent over matter and Godwin reflected: 'if the power of intellect can be established over all other matter, are we not inevitably lead to ask, why not over the matter of our own bodies?' In other words, duty must supplant desire. Needless to say, his views were cruelly satirised but despite this, he proved vast influential among reforming circles.

Towards the end of the century counter-enlightenment ideas began to take hold. The Romantics such as William Blake felt that Enlightenment's sin lay in its materialism, which denied alike the glory of God and the miracle of man. Edmund Burke philosophised this reaction in his *Reflections* (1790). He undermined the enlightened faith in permanent progress. 'We know that we have made no discoveries, and we think that no discoveries are

to be made in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood before we were born'. Evangelicalism also repudiated the enlightened. William Wilberforce argued that rational religion espoused by the enlightened was mere nominal Christianity. He argued that rational Christians were well nigh heathens for faith had to be vital, a religion of the True Cross. His Evangelicalism was grounded on human depravity -- man has fallen from his high original state. Ironically, though, it could be argued that his success in abolishing the slave trade could not have happened without the ground work undertaken by enlightened thought on the Rights of Man. Robert Malthus in predicting that the human race would outgrow its ability to feed itself was another individual who upset the enlightened belief in progress. He spelt out a dismal future, with nature ever poised to avenge herself against hubristic man. Malthus was rebutted by many opponents from all quarters and Porter suggests that the Malthusian controversy was the crux of the Enlightenment: are man and nature good?

Lasting light?

This is Porter's summary

He says 'This book has rated the 18th-century crucial to the creation of modern mentalities, claiming that British thinkers were prominent, in the precocious in such processes. To speak of Enlightenment in Britain does not merely make sense; not to do so would be nonsense. As 18th century contemporaries of all political stripes agreed, modern attitudes were inseparable from the explosion of print culture. Karl Mannheim observed at the time, 'The decisive factor of modern times… is that this monopoly of the ecclesiastical interpretation of the world, which was held by the priestly caste, is broken, and a free intelligentsia has arisen'.
It is not Porter's claim that Britain was unique, or even necessarily first, in producing a crop of ideas unknown anywhere else. But he does not believe we should be dismissive of its contribution because of the importance of Locke and Newton, Addison and Steele, Hume and Smith, Hartley and Bentham, Price and Priestley, in changing mentalities and to some degree influencing developments abroad. He also argues that the British Enlightenment was distinctive from that typical on the continent because of its pervasive individualism. Over the longer haul, he says, the pursuit of a free, open, yet stable society -- combining dynamic individualism with social orderliness -- was derailed by late century social and ideological fractures; to switch metaphors, the chickens of possessive individualism were at last, just as the doomsters had warned, coming home to roost.. Establishment apologists began to draw conclusions of their own from enlightened premises. Malthus in particular put a new gloss on desire, recruiting science to prove how legislative action could not, after all, relieve suffering and starvation. More dramatically, French revolutionary turmoil led many to change sides… yet in the long run in Enlightenment ideologies would not be discarded.

Interpretation and Critique.

I have learned a useful lesson that volunteering to read one of the largest books in the pile is a sure recipe for having to take considerably longer over the activity than the indicative time.

I enjoyed this book but I can understand why the reader two years ago did not. Part of my interest in this book arose from reading Robert Buchan's book on the Scottish Enlightenment last year which in turn arose from a study of my family history. Two of my ancestors were Edinburgh lawyers at the end of the 18th century. At first I was not at all clear what relevance it had for the leadership course but as of the book progressed I was intrigued by the number of parallels that can be drawn between 18th century society and that of today.

To give a few examples:

18th-century worries about information overload burdening people's minds as a result of the development of the press and cheaper printing seems similar to worries about the effect of the Internet.

Concerns about the effects on people's behaviour from reading novels parallels arguments about the effects of graphic sex or violence in films. The problem was not resolved 200 years ago and is not resolved today.

The Liberal Democratic party talked a lot about progressive politics during the recent election. I am not sure that the word progressive means the same to everyone and it certainly did not amongst 18th century minds.

When a philosophy is taken to its logical conclusion, as Robert Godwin did with enlightened philosophy it often becomes nonsensical and unacceptable. A more recent example might be Enoch Powell's rivers of blood speech which came from a man of considerable intellect, but by following his arguments to their logical conclusion advocated a future which was totally unacceptable to the vast majority of people in this country. Whilst it is mostly helpful for political parties to have a philosophical underpinning of their ideas he's always sensible for them to be grounded in reality.

The reaction of Pitt's government to the threat posed by the French Revolution has striking parallels with the massive increase in video surveillance and restriction of civil liberties prompted by the terrorist threat in recent years.

Malthus could not have imagined that the planet would feed the millions who now live on it. Perhaps that is why the belief that our planet is for ever self-sustaining is still held by some today.

The issues of liberty and the role of government are as hotly debated today as they were during the 18th century. I was interested to read an article about the new intake of MPs following the general election. Nicholas Watt who is the chief political correspondent for the Guardian writes about Jesse Norman, the new MP for Hereford. Mr Norman helped influence David Cameron's big society through his “connected society”. He criticises Labour's *Building Cchools for the Future* policy for concentrating on building buildings rather

than building schools. Norman says he believes the Tories have embraced new philosophical tradition. "Ever since Hobbes it's about the relationship between the individual at the State. In Hobbes the individual gives up power and a measure of sovereignty that is what creates Leviathan, that is what creates the state. That is what the social contract is. The real question is whether our politics can move away from that towards a three way, rather than a bipolar relationship, which recognises this crucial intermediary category of institutions." (The Guardian 26 May 2010)

The issue of the soul is still unresolved and the issue of defining the mind is still the subject of inquiry. Marilynne Robinson has recently written a book *Absence of Mind* (Yale 2010) exploring these issues. She suggests the possibility that our species is more than an optimised ape, that something terrible and glorious befell us, a change gradualism could not predict – "if this is merely an other fable", she says, "it might at least encourage an imagination of humankind large enough to acknowledge some small fragment of the mystery we are."

Reading Roy Porter's book has not solved any of the world's current problems nor any within the NHS. I now have an understanding of how some of my views of the world, as well as the views of many others, have been shaped by the philosophies of the British Enlightenment. This should, I hope, inform how I look at and deal with the World outside.

Notes

1)Deism (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism) is a theological position (though encompassing a wide variety of view-points) concerning God's relationship with the natural world which emerged during the scientific revolution of seventeenth century Europe and came to exert a powerful influence during the eighteenth century enlightenment. By virtue of this, deism as a theological doctrine has had a great influence on the character of the modern world.

Deism holds that God does not intervene with the functioning of the natural world in any way, allowing it to run according to the laws of nature that he configured when he created all things. God is thus conceived to be wholly transcendent and never immanent. For Deists, human beings can only know God via reason and the observation of nature but not by revelation or supernatural manifestations (such as miracles) – phenomena which deists regard with caution if not scepticism. See the section *Features of deism*, following. Deism can also refer to a personal set of beliefs having to do with the role of nature in spirituality[3].

2) Adam Ferguson; (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Ferguson)

In his ethical system Ferguson treats man as a social being, illustrating his doctrines by political examples. As a believer in the progression of the human race, he placed the principle of moral approbation in the attainment of perfection. Victor Cousin criticised Ferguson's speculations (see his *Cours d'histoire de la philosophie morale an dix-huitième siècle*, pt. II., 1839-1840):

"We find in his method the wisdom and circumspection of the Scottish school, with something more masculine and decisive in the results. The principle of perfection is a new one, at once more rational and comprehensive than benevolence and sympathy, which in our view places Ferguson as a moralist above all his predecessors."

By this principle Ferguson attempted to reconcile all moral systems. With Thomas Hobbes and Hume he admits the power of self-interest or utility, and makes it enter into morals as the law of self-preservation. Francis Hutcheson's theory of universal benevolence and Adam Smith's idea of sympathy he combines under the law of society. But, as these laws appear as the means rather than the end of human destiny, they remain subordinate to a supreme end, and the supreme end of perfection.

In the political part of his system Ferguson follows Montesquieu, and pleads the cause of well-regulated liberty and free government. His contemporaries, with the exception of Hume, regarded his writings as of great importance, but he made minimal original contributions. (see Sir Leslie Stephen, *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, x. 89-90). His work was especially influential for German writers, such as Hegel and Marx

Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) drew on classical authors and contemporary travel literature, to analyze modern commercial society with a critique of its abandonment of civic and communal virtues. Central themes in Ferguson's theory of citizenship are conflict, play, political participation and military valor. He emphasized the ability to put oneself in another's shores, saying "fellow-feeling" was so much an "appurtenance of human nature" as to be a "characteristic of the species." Like his friends Adam Smith and David Hume as well as other Scottish intellectuals, he stressed the importance of the spontaneous order; that is, that coherent and even effective outcomes might result from the uncoordinated actions of many individuals. Smith called it "the invisible hand."

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