

## Book Reviews

M. S. ANDERSON, *Historians and eighteenth-century Europe, 1715–1789*, Oxford University Press, 1979, 8vo, pp. vi, 251, £10.00.

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In his brisk and clear book, Professor Anderson traces the development of historical interpretation of some leading issues of eighteenth-century history from the verdicts of contemporaries up to the present day. Changing evaluations of eighteenth-century rulers such as Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great, Maria Theresa, and Joseph II are surveyed against the backdrop of the idea of Enlightened Despotism. The intellectual geography of the vast and blood-stained literature on the causes and nature of the French Revolution is mapped in. The triumphs (largely negative, according to Professor Anderson) of the Namierite revolution in the historiography of Georgian politics in England, are debated. Professor Anderson does not confine himself narrowly to political history. He shows how Enlightenment historiography still is – as it has always been – blatantly divided into its liberal champions (such as Peter Gay) and its conservative foes (such as Lester Crocker). And he assesses writings on the Industrial Revolution in England, indicating how scholars are still light-years away from any sort of consensus.

Professor Anderson's approach is essentially that of a workmanlike narrative: historians are discussed, individually, one after another, and their work paraphrased, in fairly strict chronological order. But he does have several general themes to offer. One is the growing breadth of historians' interests over the last two centuries: narrow political and diplomatic history have yielded to the study of economies, cultures, societies, families, and *mentalités*. Another is the recent mushroom growth in the use of quantitative methods (though Professor Anderson is dubious about their cost-effectiveness). And, above all, Professor Anderson believes that historical research and writing have got better: "our understanding of eighteenth-century Europe is now far superior to anything within the reach of past generations".

This book is an informative introduction to historians and their views. Professor Anderson's summaries are fair and his judgment, based on very wide first-hand reading, is trustworthy (though it is a pity that much important work produced over the last five years – such as Perry Anderson's writings on Absolutism – has not been assimilated). The book will be a useful guided tour for the student about to embark upon a visit to eighteenth-century history.

Yet there is not much that is original here. Professor Anderson does not rise beyond a limited conception of how to analyse history and history-writing. He does not give himself room to explore the subtleties of any single historian's thought, in the way in which, for example, Peter Geyl did in *Conversations with historians*. Neither is he very interested in investigating the ideological commitments which produce different historical interpretations, or the changing social and institutional affiliations of the historians whose views he charts. Professor Anderson's book restricts itself essentially to recording what he has found in history books. The history of historiography can progress further than that.