

J.C.D Clark The Enlightenment An Idea and its history

Jonathan Clark has sent me a copy of his new book on the Enlightenment. It provides a magnificent sweep of intellectual history over the long eighteenth century 1660 to 1832 and into the modern era. It considers the thought of England, Scotland, France, Germany and the USA.

Its central conclusion is that term The Enlightenment is one invented by twentieth century historians. There was no Enlightenment movement, and there were considerable variations of thought and intellectual interests over the decades studied and in the varied European and US geographies. When I wrote about some of the thinkers described here I tried to follow their views of what they thought and how they wished to describe their world. Jonathan does that brilliantly based on a fount of knowledge and scholarship for a wider group.

Those interpretations of our past which saw a progressive movement from superstition to science, from belief to secular rationalism, from feudal agriculture to the industrial and agrarian revolutions, from executive monarchy to democracy, sought to downplay other characteristics of the complex literature, natural philosophy and political debate of the period.

"Enlightenment" figures usually placed themselves on the side of belief in their age's struggle against atheism. They often sided with those who opposed widening the franchise and looked for sponsorship from landed wealth rather than from the new manufacturers.

It is still possible for historians to write golden thread history where England battles her way to great industrial wealth, scientific and technical advances, a better welfare system and a democratic constitution with a full adult franchise. All that is true, and today too often derided or taken for granted. It is important scholars like Jonathan reveal the complexity of the process and remind us most of the intellectuals along this carefully selected journey did not see it like that and did not belong to any modernising or Enlightenment movement. The great natural philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often wrote extensively about religious matters or dabbled with alchemy as well as producing important breakthroughs we now call scientific.