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### **Review of Mark Towsey's *Reading History in Britain and America, c. 1750-c. 1840***

The cover of Mark Towsey's book features a sketch titled "A Man Reading." We see the back of a man sitting hunched over in a chair but in a dynamic stance. At his same table is a woman writing in a notebook. This is an action shot that captures the physical and mental postures of Towsey's cast of readers and their "reading projects" in his deeply researched study. *Reading History in Britain and America, c. 1750-c. 1840* is centered on three major British histories in the Anglophone world. This isn't a problem with the book, per se, since these histories—David Hume's *The History of England* (1754-61), Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89), and William Robertson's 1769 *Reign of Charles V* (among others)—were read by everyone everywhere for years, circulating in new editions and abridgements, in digests and snippets, in libraries and bookclubs. These histories were not generally taught in formal educational settings and were read more for personal enrichment. Affordable and ubiquitous, these steady sellers acted as a kind of Rorschach test for individual readers. Towsey's book shows that even those readers who were apparently a part of the same reading publics were committed to individual reading projects that allied not only with their politics or faith but with the rhythms of their individual lives. Instead of focusing on what Hume, Robertson and Gibbon were up to at the scene of writing, *Reading History* illuminates how actual readers in the "Age of Revolutions" experienced these history books in unpredictable and disparate ways, "appropriating them for their own ends and circumstances" (15).

As Towsey surveys in chapter one, readers immersed themselves in these Enlightenment-era histories for all kinds of reasons: a personal challenge, a communal experience, a pedagogical exercise, a diversion, a moral tutorial, an imaginary journey to parts unknown. The chapters that follow drill down into more specific ideological battles waged in reader responses to these histories—from doctrinal disagreements to the specter of declining empires. Towsey's frequently-used term "reading projects" is valuable in this study because the readers he features are involved in time-intensive, sometimes collaborative, and often intertextual work. In chapter two, for instance, Towsey illuminates a heated debate in the pages of individual diaries, libraries copies of histories and in periodical reviews over Hume and Gibbon's irreligion and the danger they might pose to impressionable readers of faith. Readers of a Bodleian Library copy of Hume's first edition of *History of England* would have encountered annotations and insertions written by an unknown hand lambasting Hume's alleged atheism. Marginalia was just one of many ways to engage in debate and register one's objections. In chapter three, Towsey features readers who developed digests of selected materials from Hume in order to reconstitute the Whiggish historical teleology that Hume had controversially dismantled (114). In a similar vein, some readers like Newcastle MP William Ord, used the recto and verso sides of his notebook to "[digest] large chunks of Hume's text" and then to "[saturate] the margins of his digest with critical invective against Hume's analysis" (135), including joining a throng of critics disgusted by Hume's alleged Toryism. Ord's reading project literarily leaves space for him to change his mind about the reading and respond with both historical and contemporary counterpoints.

In some of Towsey's strongest readings, he links individual reader responses with political action. In chapter five on 1790s U.S. politics, for example, he shows that New

Hampshire historian and clergyman Jeremy Belknap was reading Hume's ruminations on the imbalance of power between the British Parliament and the crown just as he was weighing support for the New England colonists' Declaration of Rights against the Intolerable Acts (185). Or, in chapter four on the histories of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, Towsey probes how the reading and writing project of Irish author and editor Thomas Leland sought to combat Hume's prejudicial account of the Irish as "barbarous." Leland's personal reading notes on Hume emerged word-for-word in his own 1773 patriotic reclamation of Irish history, *History of Ireland*.

Readers found in their history books the justifications they needed for the causes they espoused, but Towsey also highlights examples of discord between the historian's composition and the reader's exegetical practices. In the context of British imperial control over India, for example, some readers ignored the cautionary tales of failed empires underlying works like Gibbon's. In chapter six, Towsey discusses Thomas Turner Roberts (a lieutenant in the Bombay Native infantry) whose reading of William Robertson's *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients Had of India* (1791) only proved to Roberts that Indians were "unhanging—and unchangeable," and a drain on European resources, an interpretation misaligned with Robertson's apparent intensions (230).

While Towsey's explication of reading traces is meticulous and insightful, his method raises questions about other kinds of reading traces, including citation practices. By looking, for instance, at how African American historians of the early nineteenth century cited Gibbon in their own histories, Towsey may have been able to elucidate other ways that readers used Enlightenment-era histories to understand the present and, indeed, to revise mainstream histories. Here, I am thinking specifically of histories like Robert Benjamin Lewis's *Light and Truth* (1836) which historian Stephen Hall reads as a critical response to and expansion of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, in the book's last paragraph, Towsey acknowledges the primary methodological challenge of tracing readers' thoughts about reading: the limits of the archive. Noting that many of the readers his book features are ordinary people, he also acknowledges that the "accidental survival of their reading notes" makes them exceptional. Though he does not pursue it in this project, Towsey's observation invites us to consider the implications of what evidence of reading survives and how certain kinds of "reading projects" end up in the collections of the British Library, Library Company of Philadelphia or the National Library of Wales while others vanish. Tracing reading always raising questions about the systems of value that led to their saving, cataloguing, and eventual accessibility to us.

Late in the study, Towsey admits that "as is so often the case in eighteenth-century reading notes, the precise purpose of these extracts is never spelled out" (255). Some readers may struggle to know how much weight to grant textual extractions or omissions and readers not as keenly familiar with the intricacies of Hume et. al's texts and with eighteenth-century historiography in the Anglophone world may at times find themselves in the weeds of Towsey's intricate readings. Yet Towsey so clearly came to know his readers and their commitments that his interpretive leaps are deft and largely convincing. Ultimately, *Reading History in Britain and America* is not only an important study for those interested in the afterlives of Enlightenment histories in the so-called Age of Revolutions but also as a model for those engaged in

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen G. Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

reconstructing a vibrant history of reading—in any era—from the scribbles and glosses that readers left behind.