Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature

Edited by Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle

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INTRODUCTION

Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle

The writings of Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) offer insights into history, society and politics, challenging us to reconsider our conceptions of human nature and to reflect more deeply than we otherwise might on the moral demands of modernity. Renowned for his masterwork, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Ferguson is also the author of political pamphlets, treatises of moral and political theory, a history of the Roman Republic and, late in life, numerous unfinished essays. Influenced by the Stoics and by Montesquieu, among others, he was in steady engagement with (and was sometimes critical of) contemporaries such as David Hume, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid. Not a formulaic thinker, Ferguson seeks to defend and articulate the institutions of liberty, while nonetheless reminding us of the call to lead good, rather than merely pleasurable, lives.

Ferguson’s works, spanning several decades, exhibit a general consistency of outlook. He rejects the claims and assumptions of social contract theory and argues instead for man’s immersion in history. He accepts our natural sociality but recognizes that we are also prone to conflict and opposition (and that these qualities help ensure progress). Though he embraces ideas of liberalism, he nonetheless worries over some of its moral consequences. He adheres to Stoic and teleological perspectives on human nature and moral goodness, and he espouses a theory of objective moral judgement that also grants a place for ethical sentiment. And though he suggests that the institutions and patterns of society may emerge in an unintended fashion, he defends vigorous political participation and moral leadership.

Despite Ferguson’s sometimes difficult writing style, its content conveys a sense of ease and congeniality, perhaps because his originality has the familiarity of genuine insight. For example, he describes us as animal and rational, ambitious and indolent, competitive and social; we are prone to habit yet obliged to maintain moral vigour. Thus does Ferguson – no reductionist he – recall the complexity of human nature, how it manifests countervailing tendencies. Such plural and varying dispositions may balance each other, but they also demand
the individual’s moral guidance and energy. We are, after all, creatures whose natural end is to live in liberty and for whom despotism is a continual threat. In sum, Ferguson is a modern thinker, not wholly comfortable with modernity. At one point in his Essay (II.iii) he remarks how ‘We are generally at a loss to conceive how mankind can subsist under customs and manners extremely different from our own ... But every age hath its consolations, as well as its sufferings’. Such a conclusion reflects the character of Ferguson’s thought. An evaluation and assessment of a nation or period must weigh the varying goods of life, the plural character of our dispositions, and the possibilities of circumstance.

During the eighteenth century, Ferguson’s works were widely known and translated. Over the course of time, his fame has receded somewhat, but his books, pamphlets and essays still fascinate. It is not altogether surprising, then, that an increasing number of scholars have come to recognize his significance, as manifested by scholarly essays, by a new edition of his Essay, and by the publication of both his letters (The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson) and, more recently, his papers (The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson). Given the growing interest in his thought, it is surprising and lamentable that there is no collection of scholarly essays devoted to this thinker. Two tandem volumes seek to remedy this lacuna. Reflecting Ferguson’s breadth of interests, the essays collected here (and in a second volume, entitled Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society) are authored by historians, philosophers, sociologists and political scientists. This first volume takes up topics relating to the intersection of Ferguson’s life and work, his political and diplomatic activity, his understanding of history, and his perspectives on human nature, action and progress. The second volume focuses on Ferguson the philosopher, moralist, and political theorist, taking into account his critiques of the moral thought of David Hume and Adam Smith, as well as the complex and varying interpretations of his political, social and moral theories. Each essay, original to the volume, seeks to re-evaluate an idea, theme or argument, or to reassess Ferguson’s relations to other important thinkers. As a whole, the essays range over all of his major works, as well as his pamphlets, unpublished essays and lecture notes.

Life and Works

Born in Perthshire, on the edge of the Highlands, Adam Ferguson studied divinity, became a chaplain to the Black Watch Regiment and later secured a professorial chair at Edinburgh University. Engaged in the political life of his nation and immersed in the social and intellectual circles of Edinburgh, Ferguson has long been regarded as a thinker whose Scottish identity must be germane to his writing (and, thus, to our understanding of his thought). In the opening essay of this volume, ‘Ferguson’s Epistolary Self’, John D. Brewer challenges this interpretation. Drawing from Ferguson’s letters, Brewer argues that Ferguson
makes no connection in his correspondence between his identity as a Scot and his intellectual work. Brewer suggests that Ferguson’s work is mediated through his private self, a self that does not, in fact, reveal a Highland identity. Brewer concludes that Ferguson was striving to advance knowledge in general and not the particular perspectives of Scotland.

From a divergent vantage point, David Allan contends in ‘Ferguson and Scottish History: Past and Present in An Essay on the History of Civil Society’ that even though Scotland does not figure explicitly in the Essay, that absence does not show that Ferguson was uninterested in the land of his birth. Indeed, Ferguson’s Essay was part of a distinct Scottish historiographical tradition. Although that work offers reflections derived from events and changes in eighteenth-century Scotland, it is also part of a European debate on the nature of society; thus, Ferguson aims to avoid a Scottish perspective that would render his analyses less than general.

In canvassing some of the Scottish historical texts within Ferguson’s ken, Allan illuminates some of the intellectual (and cultural and experiential) influences on Ferguson’s work. However, it is no easy task to trace the particular books that might have influenced Ferguson’s varied and broad perspectives. As Jane B. Fagg points out in her essay, ‘Ferguson’s Use of the Edinburgh University Library: 1764–1806’, there exists scant information about his personal library. Nonetheless, it is possible to reconstruct Ferguson’s borrowings from the university library. Interweaving an account of his life and works, Fagg charts the 42-year period in which Ferguson borrowed 272 books from the library. She notes the breadth of his borrowing, including the great quantity of works on Roman history and classical sources more generally.

**Ferguson in History**

Some of Adam Ferguson’s library visits were undertaken with an eye to preparing his classroom lectures. As a professor, he aimed to educate within a moral framework that stipulated the necessity of vigorous and virtuous political participation. Political activity should not be the preserve of specialists or experts but the concern of all citizens. In his essay, ‘Ferguson’s Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia’, David Raynor offers a reconsideration of Ferguson’s argument for a citizens’ militia. In his pamphlet of 1756, the Scot contends that the manners necessary for the members of a militia are born not from military training or discipline but from the traditional use and knowledge of arms. A militia is not, therefore, a training ground for virtue but an institution that presupposes it. In this sense, Ferguson advocates a small and voluntary militia restricted to men of virtue and honour.

Ferguson took an active interest in two of the defining events of the late eighteenth century. In ‘Ferguson’s Views on the American and French Revolutions’,
Yasuo Amoh delineates Ferguson’s arguments against Richard Price, an advocate for the colonies, and chronicles his work with the Carlisle Commission, dispatched in 1778 to seek reconciliation with the Americans. Amoh describes how Ferguson’s regret at the loss of the colonies reveals, among other concerns, some mercantilist assumptions. In the case of the French Revolution, Ferguson is less the agent than the observer. Despite his hope that the ‘new Republick’ would ensure peace, he also feared a social revolution and, having lived long enough to witness the rise of Napoleon, came to worry about the threat that France posed to other nations.

Ferguson’s engagement with the Carlisle Commission had given him a practical education that supplemented his worries – evident in his animadversions about the American Revolution – about trade, political expansion and the military. In 'Political Education for Empire and Revolution', David Kettler reviews Ferguson’s lecture notes of 1775–85 with an eye to how these notes offer students a political education on the topics of empire, expansion and despotism, not to mention the pragmatics of constitutional change. Kettler suggests that Ferguson came to believe that the despotic elements of empire might be controlled, and that even in the midst of drastic constitutional change, practical compromises and political bargaining would remain necessary.

Ferguson on History

A recognition that we are situated within history, that we are creatures of circumstance and nature, is a crucial characteristic of modernity. As a historian, Ferguson was never concerned solely with a chronology of events or facts. For him, history is not one element of human experience; rather, human experience is within history. History reveals the dispositions of human nature. And natural history shows how humanity develops out of the crucible of nature, circumstance and institution. In the first part of *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Ferguson employs history – including the historical literature of and about the ancients, as well as reports submitted by modern travellers – to understand and to illustrate human nature. In other instances, he employs history to reveal patterns, shifts and changes that constitute progress or decline. Just as Montesquieu sought to locate the various causes of distinct modes of governing, Ferguson recognizes that the events of history cannot be encapsulated in a single agent’s intention or some moment of explicit agreement. Thus the task of historiography, both in its narrative form (as in his history of the Roman Republic) and as natural history (as in his *Essay*) remains that of providing explanatory narrations. However, Ferguson never abandons prescriptive or didactic insights into the nature of government, the relevance of virtue or the threat of political and moral lassitude.

In 'Ferguson, Roman History and the Threat of Military Government in Modern Europe', Iain McDaniel notes how Rome’s progression to empire had
often been invoked, in the eighteenth century, to raise the spectre of military government. In contradistinction to Montesquieu, Ferguson contends, for example, that military and political functions should not be separated and that liberty prevails only if the spirit of the nation remains vigorous. A military dominated by the lower ranks of society could result in the usurpation of political power by demagogues, not to mention international conquest and military empire. Ferguson defends Rome’s constitution and argues that Britain’s military and political system, suitably reformed along the lines of the early Roman Republic, should include a citizens’ militia and the union of civic and military functions. Having examined the damage to the Republic from the strains of empire, Ferguson concludes that, for modern societies, the risks of despotism arise less from monarchy than from a military dominated by the populace at large.

Ferguson also adumbrates methodological considerations on the writing of history. In ‘Ferguson’s “Appropriate Stile” in Combining History and Science: The History of Historiography Revisited’, Annette Meyer contends that his conception of history rests between two distinct historiographical traditions, a German-dominated and theoretical understanding of historiography and a more empiricist and Anglo-American tradition. As a result, Ferguson’s methodological contributions have been slighted. In revisiting his conception of history, Meyer explains how, in moving beyond David Hume’s understanding of the ‘science of man’, Ferguson unites an empirical understanding of historiography with a more philosophical one. In so doing, he approaches the hermeneutic understanding developed by nineteenth-century historians and thinkers and sets forth a new object of historical research – mankind.

Human Nature, Action and Progress

Vigorous action has a singular importance for Ferguson. The human being is a restless creature, working to improve his circumstances, altering or modifying some feature of the landscape, or engaging in adventure or play. In ‘Ferguson’s Politics of Action’, Fania Oz-Salzberger takes up Ferguson’s belief that the human being is fully realized only in activity and exertion. Such a claim, she notes, is typically utilized with men in mind: their active and masculine natures are best cultivated and realized in civic and political life. Indeed, Ferguson understands his own account of politics to express the perspective of a participant rather than an observer. Since political freedom is a product of activity – thus does Ferguson employ the language of political virtue – politics is not to be reduced, as David Hume suggested, to a science.

In ‘Ferguson and the Active Genius of Mankind’, Craig Smith describes how the concept of action is, for Ferguson, both a description of an essential aspect of humanity and the basis of a standard of moral excellence. However, our actions often
generate unintended consequences. In what sense, then, are we morally responsible for these unintended outcomes? According to Smith, Ferguson deploys the idea of the ‘nation’ to suggest that moral responsibility for the unintended accrues at the corporate rather than the individual level. National spirit may go into decline as we dissipate ourselves in pleasure or amusement, perhaps leading to corruption as we pursue luxury to the detriment of the serious business of life.

Human activity, appropriately guided, helps to secure progress. That we have the capacity to progress is a given for Ferguson and emblematic of Enlightenment thought. For him, progress, as opposed to mere change, should be understood not in terms of material wealth but as the moral, if not spiritual, capital of individuals. Many scholars take Ferguson’s theory of society to be a secular theory, in which the development of the individual or the group is unrelated to anything outside of history. Indeed, in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* there is very little discussion of religion – even less, perhaps, than of his native Scotland! However, as Jeng-Guo S. Chen explains in ‘Providence and Progress: The Religious Dimension in Ferguson’s Discussion of Civil Society’, the former divinity student embeds his account of progress and civil society within a providentialist understanding of the universe. After describing Ferguson’s religious moderation, Chen discerns his use of a two-fold account of history, according to which a providential God ensures that, despite the travails of particular individuals or nations, there is an ongoing and universal progress. The thesis of universal progress, as Chen elucidates, owes much to Ferguson’s teacher, William Cleghorn. And although God ensures that progress will occur, Ferguson maintains that individuals remain responsible for their individual fates and those of their particular nations.

The reader will find, in these essays, new and interesting considerations of a thinker too often neglected. Adam Ferguson’s texts not only provide insights into the events and debates of the eighteenth century but they delineate ideas that resonate still. Ferguson’s rich learning, his varied interests and his moral seriousness well justify a reassessment and a renewed appreciation of the uniqueness and fecundity of his works.

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1 FERGUSON’S EPISTOLARY SELF

John D. Brewer

The renaissance of interest in Adam Ferguson lies mostly in the contemporary importance of civil society as a process to manage the growth of governmental and state power and smooth the vagaries of the economic market, and thus rests on Ferguson’s 1767 exposition of civil society in his famous *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Ferguson is thus associated by generations of new devotees with ideas of active citizenship in the form of engagement by people in civic affairs, ‘small government’, which has the state interfering as little as possible in people’s lives to preserve their freedom, and individual liberty and autonomy, the release of which allows individuals’ inherently benevolent natures to create economic growth, social harmony and personal enjoyment. This view neglects more long-standing interpretations of Ferguson as a civic humanist\(^1\) and critic of classical liberalism,\(^2\) and renders him an essentially American writer, speaking to themes that were redolent to the founders of the US constitution and which still strike the hearts of the American public.\(^3\) It is ironic, therefore, that Ferguson vehemently opposed the American War of Independence. He insisted on the necessity of the Americans submitting to lawful authority and his hawkishness intensified after visiting the colonies in the course of the war as secretary to the Carlisle Commission, which briefly brought him into contact with George Washington. ‘As for America’, he wrote in a letter to his friend Sir John Macpherson in 1779, ‘I thought our cause there was good and might be brought to a favourable issue’;\(^4\) he was more tolerant of the French and Irish Republicans than of the American revolutionaries.

This attempt to Americanize Ferguson is deeply paradoxical for it runs counter to another long-standing and popular representation of him as a very Scottish writer, to the extent that Michael Kugler describes him as provincial in his identity and concerns.\(^5\) Ferguson much loved his native land, and never wanted to be away from it for long. In one of his letters from London in 1779, Ferguson writes to his great friend Alexander Carlyle, ‘you may tell that I pant after Scotland as
the hart panteth after the water brooks and I have always thought myself within ten days or a fortnight of it.  

However, there are three senses in which Ferguson was a Scottish writer over and above the obvious point that he lived there and had strong and warm feelings towards it.

First, as both moralist and political philosopher, Ferguson engaged in long-standing intellectual debates within Scotland about morality, human nature and virtue, and with a plethora of other Scottish writers, amongst others. Second, as a precursor of sociology, Ferguson’s work was influenced by social change in Scotland at the time of his writing. Political stability and economic growth in Scotland, especially after the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, the development of an urban and commercial society and a civic culture that integrated commerce, industry, the universities and the intellectual social networks around the gentlemen’s clubs, coffee houses and literary and scientific societies, all helped to shape Ferguson’s intellectual agenda. New social and political problems arose, which Ferguson was chief in addressing, such as the alienating effects of the social division of labour, the difficulties of adjusting to the collapse of traditional mores, and the increasing risk of political instability and national decline. The popular claim amongst generations of sociologists that Ferguson was a founder of the discipline revolves around these concerns, such as his anticipation of the social functions of conflict, the stress laid on the negative consequences of the social division of labour, in particular the emergence of class conflict and exploitation, and the role accorded private property in social development, which is said to be proto-Marxist. The whole intellectual effervescence in social and political thought throughout eighteenth-century Scotland has been explained in a similar way as reflecting peculiarly Scottish circumstances.

The third sense in which Ferguson is thought of as essentially Scottish is in his background as a Scotsman, in particular as a Highlander. This is the common assessment of Ferguson as a person and is deployed extensively in the secondary literature to explain his work. Biographers allude to his Highland roots, the most well-informed and dedicated of which, Jane Fagg, points to the significance of him being the only one of the Scottish literati born there. David Allan makes the main conclusion of his new exposition of Ferguson’s life and work that he was a Highlander from a Gaelic-speaking community personally acquainted with the subjects he wrote about. One purpose of this essay therefore is to reassess the impact of Ferguson’s Scottish background on his work and to suggest that the conventional view is in serious need of revision. The main evidence used is Ferguson’s correspondence, usefully collated into two volumes by Vincenzo Merolle. Attention is focused on the ‘epistolary self’ that this correspondence displays – the self that is written about in the letters – and a second purpose behind the essay is thus to establish the usefulness of this approach for examin-
ing the connection between a writer’s life and work. I argue that Ferguson did not narrate a Highland Scots identity and makes no connection himself between his life and work. First it is necessary to show how popular is the contrary view that locates his thought in the context of his biography.

**Ferguson in Scotland and Scotland in Ferguson**

There are three issues worth separating when addressing the image of Ferguson as a Highlander whose biography supposedly shaped his work: the first is the way others routinely perceive Ferguson to be a Highlander and attach significance to this background in explaining his work; the second is whether these origins genuinely affected Ferguson’s own self-image to make him avowedly Highland in his sense of identity; the third is whether Ferguson narrates a self-image that makes its own connections between his life and work. In this section, I intend to deal with the first issue, pointing to its reasonableness as a possible interpretation of Ferguson the person and as an explanation of his thought, after which Ferguson’s letters are used to dispute these claims and to analyse the epistolary self they actually disclose.

With respect to the image of Ferguson in the secondary literature, it is very fashionable to argue that his position as a Highlander undergoing social and geographical mobility by moving to the Scottish Lowlands gave him special biographical experience of the new social problems that fired his sociological imagination. Sir Walter Scott’s anecdote of Ferguson abandoning the Bible for the claymore at the Battle of Fontenoy and having to be told by his colonel to desist from killing, only to have a broadsword tossed at him by an unwilling warrior shouting ‘damn my commission’, is enthusiastically reiterated as proof of Ferguson’s enduring Highland ways. As a school friend of two of Ferguson’s sons in Edinburgh, who later became a close friend of their father, Scott’s anecdote has some authority (although Donald MacRae is the only one to attribute it to Scott). The anecdote is repeated in academic sources, in David Stewart’s 1822 *Sketches of the Character, Manners and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland with Details of the Military Service of the Highland Regiments*, in the 1895 *Record of the Clan and Name Fergusson, Ferguson and Fergus* compiled by clan members, and in peculiar places like ‘The Gathering of the Clans’ website. Even though the anecdote is mythology, the battle being fought before Ferguson even joined the Highland Black Watch Regiment as chaplain, and is omitted from early accounts of Ferguson’s life, Ferguson’s friends undoubtedly saw him as a Highlander. Carlyle’s posthumous autobiography, which is unusually candid for the time and which Ferguson recommended not be published, probably because of its frankness about Ferguson’s unsuccessful proposals of marriage to two women, describes his family as Highland. Robert Adam expressed concern
about the deployment of his friend’s regiment to America, writing to his family, 'he will be slain as sure as he’s a highlander'. In one of his letters to Ferguson, Macpherson expressed the hope that his friend’s ailments would be healed by his ‘Highland stamina’.

It is not difficult to understand why friends and commentators so routinely invoke the Highlands to locate Ferguson’s work. Even though Logierait, the place of his birth in 1723, was only on the edge of the Highlands, a mere day or so away then by horse-drawn carriage from the commercial central belt of Scotland, in terms of the social construction of space in Scottish society at the time the place would have been perceived to be in the Highlands, especially to Lowlanders from the southern cities. Pitlochry, a few miles north up the Tay Valley from Logierait, was about as far as Lowlanders went when ‘doing the tour’ of the Highlands in the eighteenth century. Thus, despite Logierait being the seat of the head regality court of the Dukes of Atholl and the site of the large regality prison, and shown by the later Statistical Account of Scotland 1791–1799, the first of its kind, to have been prosperous and anti-Jacobite – ‘the general character of the people is sufficiently respectable; the virtues of humanity, frugality and industry, the best ornaments of human nature, flourish everywhere’ – Logierait would have placed Ferguson as a Highlander. He spoke Gaelic and ministered in the Gaelic-speaking Highland Black Watch Regiment, reinforcing the perception of Ferguson’s Highland-Scots identity.

However, this assessment is complicated by the fact that, irrespective of where Logierait might be placed in terms of the social construction of the Scottish Highlands, Ferguson’s family background would not have encouraged a Highland identity. Allan dramatizes his family background as ordinary but, while it may have been less affluent than many in the Lowlands, his mother was the sister of the tenth Laird of Hallhead in Aberdeenshire and descended from the Dukes of Argyll; his father, although able to speak Gaelic, was a strong supporter of the Protestant conversion of the Highlands and of the use of the English language in instruction at school. He was sometime Moderator of the Perth and Stirling Synod of the Church of Scotland and lifelong friend of the Dukes of Atholl. Ferguson grew up with the children of the second Earl of Atholl as playmates, with whom he developed an enduring friendship, and was warmly recommended for his first post as minister to the Black Watch – a regiment established to quell the clans – by a letter from the Duchess Dowager of Atholl. The Atholls were Protestant and Hanoverian – or at least, that branch of the family which patronized Ferguson occupied the ducal house because four more senior relatives were disqualified on grounds of their Jacobitism – and participated in Lowland politics; their feudal hold on land in the Scottish Highlands facilitated their position and influence in Hanoverian Edinburgh, such that the family bestrode both the Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland, living life as much in cosmopolitan Edin-
burgh as in the hills and glens. Moreover, from the age of nine Ferguson was educated in Perth, the county town, and by fifteen was studying at St Andrews, moving him to the Lowlands and away from whatever influences the Highlands might have had on the youngster. Thus Carlyle describes his close friend as having ‘the demeanour of a high-bred gentleman’.29

Ferguson had no bucolic little crofter upbringing, although it remains possible that he had the aristocratic affection for the Highlands of this social class. There is a complication to even this speculation however. Ferguson did not write a memoir and there is no direct reference by him in any of his published works to either his biographical Highland background or to Scotland. The work for which Ferguson is best known in sociology, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, makes mention of neither. The public writings at least provide no evidence of the writer’s self; Scotland – and the Highlands – are written out of the public record. This situates the importance of Ferguson’s correspondence, for it opens up the possibility of establishing Ferguson’s ‘epistolary self’. Liz Stanley has argued that letters constitute a theatre ‘for the construction and performance of self in which the distances of time, space and the absence of face-to-face contact enables rather than disables communication’.30 In the absence of public disclosures, the Ferguson letters therefore offer the opportunity to explore in private correspondence whether he accorded Scotland a place in his sociological work and possessed a self-image that was bound up with the Highlands, as so commonly portrayed. Before these issues are explored, it is first necessary to establish the significance of letters as a genre and the nature of the epistolary self.

The Epistolary Form

It is perhaps ironic that sociology’s ‘cultural turn’, which encouraged the focus on personal narratives, life-history methods and autobiographical writings, and thus raised the importance of letters as one mode of access into private worlds, has occurred just as letter writing is being superseded by new technologies that in future will make letters scarce. However, letters have existed since the invention of writing and became particularly popular with the introduction of official postal services. Letters have functioned as history, in revealing accounts of events and opinions thereon, as biography, in providing a window into the subject’s life, and as literature, in the sense that they can be about literature and be of such quality as to constitute good writing. Letters have functioned as social science to a much lesser extent. Inasmuch as history has been democratized and the significance of even ordinary people’s lives duly recognized, collections of letters from people of all social classes now entertain and inform us. Sociology’s use of letters fits this democratization of the epistolary form and, while there is some focus on the use of letters left by the grandees of the discipline and the famous,
such as Stanley’s analysis of Olive Schreiner’s letters, most address the letters left by ordinary people in order to access the private worlds of the laity. That letters emerge directly from the writer and were written without foreknowledge that they would become public documents encourages analysts to see them as containing less ‘narrative smoothing’ than autobiographies, possessing a freer style of reflection.

Their privacy however, is both strength and weakness. Letters might open the window into people’s private thoughts, but the glass is clouded. The disclosures in letters are often partial because so much is assumed between the correspondents to require no detail or specification; so much is known to permit the need for no retelling. Sociologists of language refer to conversationalists’ tendency to ‘over suppose and under tell’ and it applies equally to letter writers. Letters are partial in another sense for they are one-way communications; the recipient rarely speaks back. The recipient, however, is the particular person to whom the correspondence is directed and helps to shape the dialogue in ways that oblige the responses of the central subject. Letters are thus not unreconstructed texts somehow unobtrusively indicative of true feelings, for the interlocutor in part socially constructs them. Every letter thus speaks of the writer’s world only as filtered through an anticipation of the recipient’s reaction. Reconstruction of the writer’s private world can also be made difficult by the fragmentary nature of the correspondence, its incompleteness and the chronological ambiguity that arises from not knowing what is missing. As well as warning us against unrealistic expectations of their personal disclosures, texts on sociological research methods caution us to be suspicious of the factual accuracy of events described in letters in much the same way as we should be of oral history. Collections of letters, irrespective of their completeness, also suffer from what the research textbooks call the dross rate, since they contain so much mundane cataloguing and most lack sufficient focus to be analytically interesting (unless it is the textual accomplishment of mundanity that drives one’s interest in letters); and editors who select the ‘interesting’ correspondence thereby introduce unknown sources of bias.

As Stanley persuasively argues, however, we continue to use letters despite these weaknesses precisely because they are dialogical and thus reveal something of the dynamic between the interlocutors; because they are perspectival, in that they disclose the writers’ standpoint of the moment as this changes between particular correspondents and over time; and because they are emergent, in reflecting the preoccupations, no matter how mundane, of the writers and the cultural and rhetorical conventions for the articulation of these concerns. There is another strength. Letters are both located in actual things, as Stanley puts it, and about actual things: they are referential of the social setting in which they are written and disclose something of the lives of the writers. In this lies their usefulness...
to social scientists, historians and biographers. They have another value to sociologists, however, for letters involve what Stanley calls ‘a performance of self’ by the writer but, crucially, one that is affected inter-subjectively by the writer’s awareness of the ‘writing self in waiting’ of the intended recipient. This gives the epistolary self, as it might be called, the same ‘looking glass’ quality as the self-presentation done in normal social interaction, making it no different from the way sociology understands the social self generally. Even so, Stanley reminds readers that letters ‘do not contain evidence of “the real person” but traces of this person in a particular epistolary guise and as expressed at successive points in time and to a variety of people.’

If we refer to this capacity to perform the self in letters as the epistolary self, it seems to have at least three dimensions: a) the rhetorical styles, literary conventions and epistolary devices the writers adopt in the correspondence as part of their performances of self; b) the traces of personality, personal life and personal preoccupations the writers disclose; and c) the tendency to narrate self, either deliberately in order to convey a preferred self image or unintentionally. It goes without saying that the epistolary self changes over time and with particular correspondents and that multiple selves are likely to be performed, sometimes simultaneously. In archives of long-established correspondence, these changes in epistolary self across time and interlocutor permit longitudinal analysis that is impressive in its range. In the following section, I begin to apply this formulation to Adam Ferguson, in particular to reassess the connection between his life and work.

Ferguson’s Epistolary Self

The collection of Ferguson letters is an unusually complete and comprehensive archive that includes the occasional letter from his correspondents; and since his was a particularly long life (1723–1816) the archive, which begins in 1745, stretches for nearly three quarters of a century. There is much in it that would interest the historian and biographer as Ferguson describes some of the events he was involved with, such as the American War of Independence, or which occurred during his lifetime, such as the Gordon Riots, the United Irishmen rebellion and the French Revolution. He reflects on important scandals that touched him, such as instances of political corruption and religious censorship. His correspondents include important literary and historical figures – Adam Smith, David Hume, Edward Gibbon, Voltaire, Scott and Carlyle – as well as family, booksellers, publishers and politicians. He corresponded with aristocrats and artisans, and there was ‘high politics’, notably in his correspondence over international and domestic policy issues, whether about colonial policy or the formation of a Scottish militia, and ‘low politics’, as Ferguson machinated over