



**Noble past, decadent present:  
Writing the history of spanish America In the  
scottish enlightenment\***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the engagement of Scottish Enlightenment historical writers with Spanish America as a cultural region, including the conquest of America and the emergence of a colonial social order in its wake. The contributions of William Robertson in his *History of America* to these subjects is situated in his broader context, including reflections by Adam Smith, James Dunbar, John Millar, James Beattie and Henry Home, Lord Kames. Attention is granted in particular to these thinkers' attempt at global and comparative histories consistent with Hume's call for a 'science of man,' which sought to derive political lessons from the collected experience of different world societies. Finding it difficult to assimilate the complexity of historical evidence into world-historical explanatory schemes, these thinkers tended towards deploying rhetorical simplification at odds with their ambitions at objective history, with the outcome of the marginalization of the cultural specificity of Spanish America.

**Key words**

Historiography, Scottish Enlightenment, Perceptions of Latin America, William Robertson.

\* Pasado noble, presente decadente: escribiendo la historia de hispanoamérica en la ilustración escocesa

The European so-called discovery of the New World has long been appreciated as a world historical event. In the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith celebrated it, along with the Portuguese rounding of the Cape of Good Hope, as one of the “two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind” (Smith, 1776: 2:235, lib. VI, c. VII). In doing so, Smith was only offering a commercially-focused recasting of a widely-circulating historical truism. By Smith’s time, authors across Europe had for centuries been reformulating Francisco López de Gómara’s declaration that the discovery was “la mayor cosa después de la creación del mundo, sacando la encarnación y muerte del que lo crió” (Gómara, 1552: Dedicación; Burke, 1995: 40-41). Similarly, Smith lacked much originality in declaring that “it was the sacred thirst of gold...that carried Cortez to Mexico, and Almagro and Pizarro to Chili and Peru” (Smith, 1776: 2:154, lib. VI, c. VII). These events—and the anti-Spanish polemic contained in their recounting—comprised part of the general knowledge of world history held by most educated Europeans in the eighteenth century.

What happened after these events—the cultural impact of the Spanish conquest, the formation of a new Spanish American society and the contemporary state of these societies—were however stories less told. During the 1760s and 1770s, one of Smith’s compatriots, the cleric-turned-historian William Robertson, engaged in an attempt to understand the processes of the emergence of an Iberian social order in the Americas following Columbus, Cortez and Pizarro, in his innovative *History of America*, first published in 1777 in two volumes. In the preface to the work, Robertson declared his interest in “the most splendid portion of the American story,” that of “the discovery of the New World, and of the progress of the Spanish arms and colonies there” (Robertson, 1777: Preface, I:vi).

While the contributions of the Scottish Enlightenment to the practice of history—particularly in its comparative and global iterations—have recently been the subject of renewed attention, the engagement of its thinkers with Spanish America has not yet received extended attention. (Sebastiani, 2013: 1-102; Allen, 2013: 307-342; Quiro Chueca, 2005: 160-163.) This article fills this gap by examining the image of colonial Spanish America in historical works composed by a range of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, including Henry Home (Lord Kames), John Millar, James Dunbar and James Beattie in addition to Robertson and Smith. These authors and their works will be approached as indicative of the state of history as a knowledge form—as a

science—in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment. In so doing, I will attempt to offer an intellectual historical exploration of the global and comparative horizons of eighteenth-century contemporaries, and their engagement with Spanish America as part of their broader project of a global history in line with the objectives of David Hume’s ‘science of man.’ By doing this with the case study of Spanish America, ‘I seek to offer insights into Scottish Enlightenment historians’ practice of inter-regional comparison and the question of conquest-induced change in cultural identity—or, as they rendered it, ‘national character.’

The location of Latin America in historical accounts adopting world—or more recently, global—frames of analysis has tended to be towards the margins. Budding world, global—or some centuries’ past, universal—historians have found it difficult to reconcile comparative methodologies based ultimately on relatively static core cultural zones (in the past, ‘civilizations’) with Latin America’s inherent diversity, produced by its unique process of emergence from a cataclysmic inter-civilizational invasion. Göran Therborn’s identification of Latin America as an ‘intersitial’ zone of family values—rather than a distinct cultural zone itself—in his global history of the family exemplifies the standard approach (Therborn, 2004: 11-12). Rather than comprising a ‘distinct’ core culture, Latin America tends to be understood as site to a fascinating intersection of cultural traditions: linked on the one hand through many cultural similarities—from religion to language—to both Europe and North America; perceived on the other hand as a region with a distinct character, separated in terms of economic power and geopolitics from what might be considered the Western ‘core’ encapsulated in organizations like NATO (Feres Juniór, 2008).

In the Scottish Enlightenment, trajectories towards the “two Americas” binaries—of a wealthy, Protestant, English-speaking North versus a poor, Catholic, Spanish and Portuguese-speaking South—existed in tandem with a general assertion of American inferiority. The legacy of the *Leyenda Negra* and negative assessments of Spaniards dovetailed with Buffon and Cornelius De Pauw’s infamous (and influential) theses of American degeneration (Carbia, 1943; García Cárcel, 1992). Spanish American Creoles thus faced double demerits in the eyes of various European publics: first as connected with a decadent, un-Enlightened home culture (Spain), and secondly as Natives of an inherently degenerate continent. Intriguingly, this led to a macrohistorical vision during the eighteenth century which contrasted the glory of the two

most extensive pre-Columbia civilizations [Mexico (represented through the Aztecs) and Peru (through the Incas)] against a supposedly decadent and baroque Spanish colonial present. Contemporary anti-Spanish polemics of the Enlightenment, which saw Spain as the embodiment as all that was ill with the *ancien régime*, thus led to the story of the introduction of Spanish influence in the new world being rendered as a story of decadence and decline.

### **Towards a New History:**

#### **The Historiographical Interventions of William Robertson's *History of America***

The history of European colonialism and the history of European expansion excited great interest in the Enlightenment for a diverse range of figures, from novelists and playwrights to historians and political economists. Spanish America held a particular interest for these figures as site to a particularly intense experience with these processes. In abbé Raynal's *Historie des deux Indes*, a critical history of European colonialism, America featured prominently as a poster child of the ills of European imperial rivalry, the brutal institution of Atlantic plantation slavery and the destruction of native peoples. Scottish Enlightenment discussion of these phenomenon to be far less vociferous, in line with its generally conservative political orientation. Smith critiqued American plantation slavery as being economically counter-productive due to discouraging investments in productivity, but failed to voice much sympathy for the human lives it destroyed. His protege John Millar was more vocal in this regard, concluding the third edition of his *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* on the hope of the abolition of slavery.

Whereas Smith and Millar discussed contemporary American conditions within their treatises in economy and historical jurisprudence, Raynal and his co-writers, including Diderot, did this through a politicization of the genre of the travel narrative or description of foreign lands. This genre had been the primary disseminator of information about the world beyond Europe ever since the first great drama of Columbus's stumbling upon the islands of the Caribbean. Jesuits and missionary learned men, soldiers like Bernal Díaz who accompanied Cortés' invading force, and hybrid figures such as Garcilaso de la Vega, who defended the honor of his Inca ancestors by writing a description of the Inca empire before its fall, all produced descriptions of the distant lands they had the occasion to visit or belong. They related their experiences freely and diversely, covering matters from dress and attire to system of government

to epic battles. In the eighteenth century, these figures were joined by imperial bureaucrats and natural scientists such as La Condamine, Antonio de Ulloa and Jorge Juan, who continued the practice of describing the conditions of the lands they happened to be passing through for various purposes. While these materials contained much useful information, they generally lacked a historical dimension. Instead, they represented the political and economic orders of non-European and past societies (as the case was with the Aztecs and Incas) as basically static entities. The travel narrative offered a description of the conditions of a different place, not the patterns or processes of change operative in these places.

In addition to the travel narrative, information about the pre- and post-history of the Spanish conquest of the Americas was provided throughout the early modern period through the genre of history (or histories). For most of the early modern period, these were structured mainly by person-focused narratives. Authors and publishing houses had been quick to exploit the burning curiosity following out from Columbus' journey and the subsequent conquests of Mexico and Peru. In terms of genre, these three events were all easy to situate into existing Renaissance practices of historical narration, which followed the exploits of history through a leading figure, in these cases, variously Columbus, Cortés and Pizarro (Burke, 1995: 31-51).

Building upon the works of the seventeenth-century historian Jean Baudoin, a coterie of British historians towards the end of the eighteenth century—David Hume, Edward Gibbon, John Millar, and William Robertson—all sought to write a different sort of history, a step which marked an important transition in the history of historiography. Rather than focusing on specific battles or illustrious leaders of the past, they charted broader stories of the rise and fall of empires and the transition of societies to different economic and property orders. For our purposes here, the contribution of the cleric-turned-historian William Robertson is of prime interest. Robertson served as Principal of the University of Edinburgh for three decades during the prime of the Scottish Enlightenment, and was well-connected with all its major figures. Building upon the successes of his *History of Scotland* (1759) and *History of Charles V* (1769), Robertson sought to tackle an ambitious historical question: Europe's expansion into America, and the amalgamation of the Western Hemisphere into the European sphere of power (Lenman, 1997: 200-201).

Events in the 1770s undermined the basic premise of Robertson's *History*: the American Revolution left it unclear how linked the western hemisphere would remain with Europe. In terms of public demand, the events certainly promised great public interest in a new history of the America—but at the same time, any critical comments about British colonial policy could be interpreted as an act of sedition, as unpatriotically siding with colonial rebels over a unified British state. Striking a cautious balance between the two, Robertson limited coverage to Spanish America when he released the work in 1777. He left his project uncompleted. His son posthumously published his incomplete work on the British colonies in 1796 (Robertson, 1796); Robertson never made much progress with histories of the colonies of the other European powers. In any case, Robertson's main interests had already been oriented to Spanish America as site to the longest history in the region, as well as site to the most significant events. Robertson benefitted in this endeavor from a unique assortment of manuscript documents, direct testimony (via questionnaires) and an array of earlier published works that no historian of his generation had yet explored in such depth (Cañizares-Esguerra, 2002: 38-59). Key to this was Robertson's close connections with the British Ambassador to Spain, Lord Grantham, and the work of his chaplain, Mr Waddilove (Lenman, 1997: 202-06).

Robertson's history of Spanish America ran to two volumes and eight chapters, but corresponded to three basic phases: 1) the state of American peoples before the Spaniards (Books IV and VII), 2) the decisive turning points of discovery and conquest (I-III, V-VI) and 3) the aftermath (VIII). Robertson began with discovery and conquest, unsurprisingly given that they were subjects that had long proven their power to captivate reader interest. The majority of Robertson's history of Spanish America consisted of exciting and well-documented, albeit rather conventional, narratives of the adventures of Columbus, Cortés and Pizarro.

Robertson's most interesting contributions to historical theory came after these narratives, wherein he recounted the condition of the inhabitants of the Americas prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Separating the Aztecs and the Incas from the rest of pre-Columbian Spanish societies, Americans were cleaved into two forms: savage and half-civilized. This was a contribution to the broader stadial historical project of David Hume's "science of man": the fabrication of historicized models of societies occupying different stages in a culturally neutral, universal history of social progress (Sebastiani, 2014;

Berry, 2011: 2-19). The main goal was not to understand these societies as possessing unique, internal historical processes of change, but rather as reflections of a certain state of development, a certain state of being. In this sense, Robertson could be considered as maintaining the ahistorical nature of the travel narrative/land description genre, for a new effect: as a theoretical tool of a standardized history of mankind.

### **Before the Spaniards: Aztecs and Incas**

The development of a Spanish colonial order following the conquest of the Americas was by Robertson's time a story centuries old. The Aberdeen Professor James Dunbar, a contemporary of Robertson's, described this order as a humiliating disaster for the natives of America, whom the Spaniards had shunted to a position below even the brutally-enslaved Africans (Dunbar, 1780: 394-96). Dunbar even wondered if the inhabitants of "the empires of Peru and Mexico" would have chosen extinction over such a disgrace, should they have known their eventual destiny (Dunbar, 1780: 394-96.) Dunbar did not answer the famous essay competition of 1785—"Has the discovery of America been beneficial or harmful to the human race?"—but made clear what the impact of 'discovery' for the indigenous of the Americas was: "The pen drops from my hand, in reciting the enormities acted by Europeans in the new hemisphere" (Dunbar, 1780: 396). Dunbar here points, albeit darkly, to a fundamental aspect of the story of the emergence of Spanish American colonial society: that it resulted from the destruction of past civilizations, and that this new society was founded upon a racialized order which forced the indigenous to perpetually relive their defeat.

There are at least two ways to understand why figures such as Dunbar had so much more sympathy for the plight of the former subjects of the Inca and Aztecs than to the Spanish conquerors. The first and most common in the scholarship is to ground it in its local, intra-European political context, focusing on inter-imperial rivalry as well as Enlightened contempt for the Spanish Empire. That is to say that the Inca, Aztecs and other indigenous nations of America were sympathetic by virtue of the *Leyenda Negra*. I would contend however that this interpretation marginalizes the bright, positive, and powerful image that both the Aztecs and Incas (as the representative rulers of the two largest civilizations in the Americas prior to Columbus) acquired in the eighteenth century as exemplars of exotic government forms. This especially applies to the case of the Incas.



Henry Home, Lord Kames, an active figure in Edinburgh legal establishment and a vital link between wealthy Scottish patrons and philosophers active in the Scottish Enlightenment, was an admirer of both the Aztecs and Incas, noting that “there never was a country destitute of iron, where arts seem to have been carried higher than in Mexico” (Kames, 1774: 2:97-98, lib. II, sketch XII). Kames also wrote that the Incas held “an absolute monarchy... but the farthest in the world from being despotic: on the contrary, we find not in history any government so well contrived for good of the people” (Kames, 1774: 2:96, lib. II, sketch XII). Kames was relatively restrained in his praise. The Aberdonian thinker James Beattie declared that “every body has heard of the magnificence, good government, and ingenuity, of the ancient Peruvians” (Beattie, 1771: 509). In Germany, the Cameralist thinker Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi praised the framer of the Inca constitution as “the second Lycurgus,” going so far as to call him the better Lycurgus! (Justi, 1762: 546). The case of Justi in particular evidences how images of pre-Columbian American civilizations as exemplars of government—in the case of the Inca, as a collectivist, property-redistributing government—lived a life beyond the world of anti-Spanish political and economic critique.

Robertson’s own portrayal of the Aztecs and the Incas was very detail rich and probably in its pre-published form provided the source base for Kames’ commendation of both societies in his *Sketches* (1774). However, although Robertson maintained that he found that most of what had been related about the two civilizations to be credible, he began his chapter on them by dismissing them as far less developed than the Romans, stating that “neither the Mexicans nor Peruvians will be entitled to rank with those nations which merit the name of civilized” (Robertson, 1777: 2:268, lib. VII). This dismissal creates a considerable internal dissonance within the text, given that his narrative description of the institutions and accomplishments of the ancient Inca was basically unqualified (Kontler, 2014: 140). Robertson here seems to have stumbled into a contradiction between his attempts of a providentialist history of America, a contribution to the stadial project of ‘histories of man’ and his practice of exhaustively documented historical research.

Adam Smith may have been a further factor in Robertson’s decision to marginalize the accomplishments of the Aztecs and Inca. Smith was one of their greatest skeptics in the eighteenth century. As Christian Marouby has explored, this was due to the contradiction they posed to his theoretical model of human history, commonly rendered as the ‘four-stage mode’. (Marouby,



2007: 85-102). In this model, Smith described the domestication of animals (pasturage) as a critical event in the history of human property relations and alimentary conditions that preceded agriculture. To deal with the problematic matter of Native Americans, who in the eighteenth century were well known to have practiced wide-scale agriculture, Smith dismissed the presence of plants in their diet as mere “seasoning” to game. The Inca and Aztec posed even greater of a problem because of the large populations both empire were supposed to have held. To counter this, Smith offered a searing critique of the Inca and Aztec in the *Wealth of Nations*, declaring that, in spite of “all the wonderful tales which have been published concerning the splendid state of those countries in ancient times,” that “all the ancient arts of Mexico and Peru have never furnished one single manufacture to Europe” (Smith, 1776: 1:254, lib. I, c. XI). To Robertson’s credit, even if he rhetorically marginalized the accomplishments of Aztecs and the Incas, he still offered a full recounting of what had been written about them in his sources.

### **Spanish Mishandling of the Conquest**

Even if the Aztecs and the Inca were not as impressive as others might think, Robertson was adamant about one thing: that the Spaniards had basically squandered their fortune of American domination through economic incompetence and mismanagement. Robertson made sure to note that the tide seemed to have turned with the coming of the Bourbon kings. In particular, he emphasized the contributions of Carlos III and his father Felipe V in adopting administrative reform as well as permitting freer trade between the different lands of America (Robertson, 1777: 2:415-418, lib. XIII). Robertson’s friendliness toward the Bourbon reformer might be attributed to his tolerance of his project of writing a history of the New World, though Robertson never managed to obtain access to manuscript materials sequestered at Simancas (Armitage, 1995: 66). Beyond the economic, Robertson was unsparing in his contention that Spain had also done a poor job in converting the indigenous people. He again underlined, however, that this was due to the decisions of people on the ground, not imperial design.

As the Scottish Enlightenment’s greatest advocate of global evangelization and the civilizing mission, the historical fact of the Spanish ambition to convert the Natives of America to Catholicism exercised a special draw on his attention. Although incomplete, and from his perspective, full of errors, it had been the most successful conversion mission in Christianity in a millennium.

Robertson possessed a pronouncedly providentialist understanding of human history which ultimately understood Spain's conquest of the Americas as part of a divine plan to extend Christianity globally. Robertson's first published work was a sermon that could be described as the inaugural lecture to the civilizing mission of the domestic sphere. An enemy of polygamy, which was tightly associated with the ultimate Other of the Enlightenment, the Islamic Orient; Robertson hoped that it could be banished through the process of European-Christian domination: May we not flatter ourselves, that, at last, they shall become noble instruments in the hand of God for preparing the world to receive the gospel?... This glorious prospect may be distant, but it is not imaginary" (Robertson, 1775: 1:133-34). Robertson, like Smith and Millar, opposed slavery, but hoped that the process of European colonization would bring with it the conversion of all mankind to Christianity. For Robertson, the Spanish conquest was not a terrible thing: for him, the civilizing mission itself was legitimate. The problem was simply that the Spanish had done an insufficient job, made worse through bad policy.

### **Robertson's Social History of Spanish America**

The shortest part of the *History of America* is that which recounts the present state of Spanish America, the only extended account offered by a Scottish Enlightenment thinker on the colonial social order produced in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest. Robertson gave his account mainly through the framework of the *sistema de castas*—the controversial pseudo-racial system that emerged in Spanish America following the conquest of the New World, which assigned various ranks and designations to different combinations of three core groups of white, black and Indian (Miller 2013: 21-32).

Robertson began his discussion of the *sistema* by recognizing the important distinction made in the Americas between two forms of Europeans: *peninsulares*, who were born in Europe, and *criollos*, who were born in the Americas. It is here where the concept of America as a site of degeneration—and Spanish America as perhaps a decayed society—becomes most apparent. Robertson described the creoles as “languid and unenterprising: by the enervating influence of a sultry climate, by the rigour of a jealous government, and by their despair of attaining that distinction to which mankind naturally aspire, the vigour of their minds is so entirely broken, that a great part of them waste life in luxurious indulgences, mingled with an illiberal superstition still more debasing” (Robertson, 1777: 2:367, lib. VIII).

Due to their superiority complex derived from living in a caste-ridden society, they were also unwilling to do any manual labor, and unlike the *peninsulares*, who actually established new fortunes in the Americas, the creoles simply lived off the inheritance of their predecessors. (Robertson, 1777: 2:366-368, lib. VIII). Robertson's discussion here was short but points to a great polemic that played out further afield in the Enlightenment in the 1760s and 1770s following Cornelius de Pauw's publication of *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* in Berlin in 1767. De Pauw disparaged America as a degenerative land, where all forms of life, including humans, became sapped of power and progressively diminished further and further in capacity. He explicitly pointed out the supposed lack of any intellectual achievements of the creoles of the Americas as evidence of this. As Jorge Canizares-Esguerra has explored, this work played an important part in instigating a local American patriotism, where expelled Jesuits and American creoles fought to defend the honor of their home continent and their own people. Robertson, while not making the stark claim of degeneration, maintained the general opinion operating in Europe of the time of the decadence of the Spanish creoles of America.

More broadly in his description of the castas of Spanish America, Robertson balanced two theories surrounding their emergence: stemming from the politics of integration on the one side, basic lust on the other:

As the court of Spain, solicitous to incorporate its new vassals with its ancient subjects, early encouraged the Spaniards settled in America to marry the natives of the country, several alliances of this kind were formed in the infant colonies. But it has been more owing to licentious indulgence, than to compliance with this injunction of their sovereigns, that this mixed breed has multiplied so greatly, as to constitute a considerable population in all the Spanish settlements. (Robertson, 1777: 2: 368, lib. VIII).

Robertson sought to rigorously document his study and offered precise footnotes, including page numbers, to his sources. However, as was typical in the Scottish Enlightenment, these citations frequently had only a loose connection with the original claim of the source. Robertson cited three references in support of the claim that Spanish sovereigns ordered their subjects to mix; none, however, had actually made this. In his citation of a recompilation of the Laws of the Indies carried out under Carlos II in 1680, and his two citations from Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas' *Historia general de los hechos*

*de los Castellanos en las islas, y tierra-firme de el mar océano* (1601-15), the closest assertion one can find is the order given to the early Governor of Hispaniola Nicolás de Ovando to promote Christianization through mixing—not explicit political vassalization.

Robertson also speculated that the Spanish maintained the *sistema de castas* and intentionally excited racial tensions for their own advantages: encouraging hatred between blacks and Indians for purposes of colonial order. Dunbar repeated the point (Dunbar, 1780: 394-95). The Spaniards “endeavored to prevent every intercourse that might form a bond of union between the two races” (Robertson, 1777: 2:370, lib. VIII). Unlike in other parts of the hemisphere, Blacks in Spanish America resented the Indians and viewed themselves as closer to whites than to Indians (Robertson, 1777: 2:369-70, lib. VIII). Robertson saw this as emanating both from blacks themselves as well as Spaniard design. “By an artful policy”—both laws and injunctions—“the Spaniards derive strength from that circumstance in population which is the weakness of other European colonies” (Robertson, 1777: 2:369-70, lib. VIII).

The center of interracial tension in Spanish America for Robertson was Peru. Although the peninsular leadership persistently sought to have Indians accepted to priesthood and religious orders, Peruvian orders continually ignored them (Robertson, 1777: 2:506). To Robertson, nothing demonstrated more the insurmountable “hatred and contempt of the Indians among the Peruvian Spaniards” (Robertson, 1777: 2:506, note LXXXVIII). He also thought this discord also characterized the relations between Indians and blacks. Although the “negroes seem to be more numerous...they maintain their ascendant over the Indians, and the mutual hatred of one to the other subsists with equal violence” (Robertson, 1777: 2:369, lib. VIII). In spite of Robertson’s concept of a Peru torn apart by racial conflict and the alleged attempts by the Spanish government to prevent unions between blacks and Indians, we know that this sort of pairing was actually a common occurrence.

### **The Scottish Enlightenment’s Unresolved Ambition: The Place of “National Character” in History**

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, Enlightenments across America witnessed the rise of patriotic Creole discourses that opposed the degeneration thesis with celebrations of their local contexts (Entin, 2013: 19-34. Cañizares-Esguerra, 2002). This refutation of climatism via regional identi-

ty formation was paralleled in the Scottish Enlightenment with the attempt to de-prioritize environmental explanations of human difference in favor of ‘national character.’ While Scottish historians of the second half of the eighteenth century followed David Hume in understanding ‘national character’ as a principal differentiator of peoples—nations—across the world, they did not possess a rigorous explanation of the effects of time and historical processes upon the emergence, formation and changing of these characters.

In good part, this followed from their inability to fully escape from aspects of physical explanations of human difference. Hume’s infamous speculations upon essential racial inequalities—that blacks were naturally inferior to other groups—did not constitute a path taken up by his Scottish Enlightenment successors. It did, however, betray the limits of his own methodological consistency, given that his ‘science of man’ required a single, unified humanity which was subject to unchanging laws of human sociability. The famously eclectic (and self-contradicting) Henry Home, Lord Kames, enthusiastically resorted to climate as one of many possible reasons for any given historical facet, yet even the more rigorous Glaswegian Professor of Civil Jurisprudence John Millar was unable to fully escape its rhetorical power. Millar contested that climate had little explanatory power in the introduction to the third edition of his *Distinction of Ranks*: “How many nations are to be found, whose situation in point of climate is apparently similar, and, yet, whose character and political institutions are entirely opposite?” (Millar, 1779: 13). Yet, his “natural history of mankind” was unable to offer convincing explanation for why national characters themselves changed, outside of historic accident (Millar, 1779: 14).

In the case of William Robertson, the absence of a sustained framework for investigating the effects of conquest and cultural fusion in formation of new identities (‘national characters’) led to a conventional, negative portrayal of Spanish American creoles. Robertson drew upon two competing discourses: 1) Creoles as ‘decadent,’ via latent civic humanist strictures of the consequences of extreme inequality, and 2) ‘lazy’ due to reasons of climate. Although Robertson noted with hope the recent reforms of Carlos III, he painted a dismal image of contemporary Spanish America: a race-torn society dominated by a group of degenerate creoles and suffering the consequences of centuries’ of economic and governmental mismanagement. He had received much more sympathetic testimony from people with actual experience in the Americas in a series of questionnaires he had remotely conducted via Mr Waddilove,

the chaplain of the British Ambassador to Spain, Lord Grantham (Lenman, 1997: 202-06). However, Robertson chose to ignore this testimony and depend instead upon widely-circulating (and widely-translated) travel narratives—in particular, that provided by the scientific travelers Ulloa and Juan. Robertson provides a unique window into Scottish Enlightenment appraisals of his contemporary Spanish America because of the depth of his comments, not by their originality. As he well shows, America had yet to obtain much of a distinctive cultural identity of its in the eyes of eighteenth-century European observers. Opposing this conceit would be the struggle of a generation of patriotic creole thinkers and historians reformulating Enlightenment ideas for their own ends.

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