

Book Reviews

JOHN DWYER, *Virtuous discourse: sensibility and community in late eighteenth-century Scotland*, Edinburgh, John Donald, 1987, 8vo, pp. viii, 204, £20.00.

Reappraisals of the history and historiography of the Scottish Enlightenment abound these days. Yet however much is produced, authors continue to find new and interesting things to say. John Dwyer has certainly proved this in his excellent, fairly short study of the Scottish moralists. Dwyer, thankfully, has not taken the high road to philosophy but has investigated the output of the eighteenth-century literati as contributions to a contemporary debate about the state of Scotland. In his study of newspapers, poetry, and novels, Dwyer displays the Scottish moralists agonizing over the dangers of commerce, luxury, and corruption, and, at the same time, trying to steer Scotland on a course to prosperity and improvement. The best two chapters in the book explore this theme by looking at the Scottish definition of adolescence and the role of women. Dwyer also demonstrates exceedingly well the decline of the Scottish literary republic during the economic and demographic changes coinciding with the French Wars. On the negative side, the book does display a certain timidity when it engages with the “What was happening in Scotland?” question. Nowhere does Dwyer spell out what he sees as the relationship between the profound material changes occurring in Scotland at this time and the status of the works he has studied. After all, the sentimental gushings that were inspired by the poems of Ossian were produced by people enmeshed in a patronage chain run by those who were radically changing the Scottish way of life. Unfortunately, too, Dwyer almost totally ignores science and medicine as sources of moral persuasion. Medicine is mentioned only briefly, in spite of the recent growth of a literature which argues that medical ideas were closely bound to change in Scotland. It would be wrong, however, to end on a critical note. This is a fine scholarly book, and numerous aspects of it deserve attention by all historians working on eighteenth-century cultural matters, whichever side of the Tweed they inhabit.

Christopher Lawrence
Wellcome Institute