CHAPTER SIX

“A MAN OF MODERATE PASSIONS”: FASHIONING AN ENLIGHTENED SELF

A member of the Innes family of Stowe started to compile a commonplace book sometime in the 1790s that was typical of its kind. Deploying John Bell’s printed template in the manner prescribed by John Locke, Dugald Stewart and countless other educational writers of the eighteenth century, the Innes commonplacer collected reading notes under a wide range of subject headings including standard topics of eighteenth-century moral philosophy such as virtue, learning, courage, justice, liberty and reason. As such, the Innes commonplace book reads like a straight-forward exercise in self-fashioning, seemingly intended to inculcate precisely those values that Rick Sher suggests were endorsed by “Enlightenment supporters everywhere.” Nevertheless, the Innes commonplace book offers little sense of how the compiler personally engaged with books by David Hume, Hugh Blair, William Robertson, Joseph Addison, Henry Fielding, Oliver Goldsmith and Lord Chesterfield. Instead, the Innes reading notes were highly constrained by the generic requirements of commonplacing, being driven by a search for pithy phrases and memorable aphorisms which might later be used to enliven our reader’s conversation and beautify his or her letter-writing. There is little sense that Innes actually subscribed in any depth to the sentiments he collected and at no time did he introduce independent commentary on the notes he extracted. As a result, the personal meaning of such notes is often entirely irrecoverable; at times, indeed, it seems the commonplacer’s attention wandered from the search for edifying material towards more frivolous anecdotes, such as that on “the English” apparently confirming their fondness for puddings:

1 NAS GD113/1/475, Bell’s Common Place Book, Form’d generally upon the Principles Recommended and Practiced by Mr. Locke (London, 1770), Innes of Stowe copy. For a more detailed discussion, see my “‘Patron of Infidelity’: Scottish Readers Respond to David Hume, c.1750–c.1820”, BH, 11 (2008), 89–123.

2 Sher, “Storm over the Literati”, 43.
David Hume relating the manner in which Henry the 8th gifted the revenues of the convents says, “he was so profuse in these liberalities that he is said to have given a woman the whole revenue of a convent, as a reward for making a pudding which happened to gratify his palate”.

The Innes commonplace book therefore reinforces the dilemma outlined at the end of the previous chapter that interpreting surviving reading experiences is by no means a simple procedure – in Robert Darnton’s words, “the documents rarely show readers at work, fashioning meaning from texts, and the documents are texts themselves, which require interpretation”. As we have seen, reading was at all times contingent not simply on the ability and application of the individual reader, but was also guided – especially in the eighteenth century, with the rise of Enlightened literary criticism and Addisonian politeness – by a range of external cultural forces that had a vested interest in shaping its intellectual outcomes. This chapter therefore looks more systematically at contemporary responses to the books of the Scottish Enlightenment, paying close attention to precisely what was involved when readers encountered one of the celebrated philosophical or historical books of the Scottish Enlightenment. By analysing the procedures adopted by readers in making sense of these books, we can hope to reconstruct the relationships that developed between books and their readers, the impact they had on people’s beliefs, values and habits of mind, and ultimately the Enlightenment’s contribution to the construction of personal identities.

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When they first came across Enlightenment books, readers commonly compiled digests of the key terms involved. This was precisely the approach taken by Stephana Malcolm of Burnfoot, near Langholm, upon first opening Thomas Reid’s *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* sometime in the late 1780s, simply summarising the broadly instructive intent of his “Preliminary Chapter” on the “explication of words”:

As there is nothing which is a greater obstruction to philosophy than the ambiguity of words we shall give a definition of the principle ones used in this book.

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