

Tracing a meridian through the map of time: fact, conjecture and the scientific method in William Robertson's *History of America*

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The Author

Dr Roberts is a lecturer in eighteenth-century English Literature at University College London. Having completed her BA at the University of Cambridge in 2006, she spent a year studying at Harvard University before returning to Cambridge for her graduate studies. She took up a Junior Research Fellowship at Clare College, Cambridge, in 2011 and her PhD, on history and autobiography in the work of Edward Gibbon, was awarded in 2012.

Dr Roberts has published the Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Memoirs* (*J ECS*, 2011), and chapters on his religious views and literary character are forthcoming (Ashgate and CUP, 2014). Her first book, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History*, will be published by OUP in 2014. She is currently working on a variety of projects that investigate eighteenth-century attitudes to history and the past, in preparation for a future publication, and is particularly interested in historiography's intersections with other disciplines (such as natural philosophy and aesthetics) and the political uses of history in the long eighteenth century.

The Paper

William Robertson's *History of America* (1777) is a history with a seemingly contradictory methodology: on the one hand, it is the work in which Robertson demonstrates his most sustained application of stadial history, alongside other theoretical systems; on the other hand, it is a work that scholars have identified as having an almost proto-Romantic appreciation for facts felt with all their independent

and contingent force. This essay argues that Robertson is fully aware of this tension, and that he uses his history of an encounter between imaginative and speculative Spanish conquistadors and independent, sensory American savages to dramatise the intellectual extremes between which he must navigate.

Ever since the publication of Dugald Stewart's biography, Robertson's scientific interests and knowledge have remained unexplored: the first article that I have been able to find that examines any of Robertson's works in the context of natural philosophy was published earlier this year (Ehrlich, 2013). Yet the environments in which Robertson lived and worked (the University of Edinburgh; the Church of Scotland; the Scottish Enlightenment more generally) were all influenced by scientific and especially Newtonian ideas, and there is evidence that Robertson engaged with these ideas throughout his life. In this essay I argue that Robertson uses his history of the age of discovery to explore scientific methodologies that might allow him to reconcile theory and particularity: first Newton's experimental method, and later vitalist conceptions of activity and complexity that acknowledge the importance of harmonious variety to the science of man.

This paper is the first attempt at a chapter that will be published in an edited collection - *Visions of History: 1680-1830* (Palgrave Macmillan) - next year.