I am concerned here not to argue for a particular interpretation of the Scottish Enlightenment but rather to see what elements of that eighteenth-century movement Archibald Alison considered useful in constructing a response to the stresses and strains of British society in the early nineteenth century. If we accept that the central concern of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Scottish intellectuals were how to preserve the traditional community while adapting it to new knowledge and commercial pressures, we have a framework for incorporating the range of modern interpretations and for understanding the eclecticism of people such as the Alisons. (7)

Such is the stated purpose of this biographical history of Sir Archibald Alison (1792-1867), a man who lived through the tumultuous years of the French Revolution, as well as the 1830 and 1848
Revolutions, which served to foster a great deal of conservative politics both on the continent and in Britain, as it watched with great concern the events across the channel. Internally, Britain was not unaffected by the working-class push for change. Chartism was prevalent, the excesses of the Industrial Revolution could no longer be ignored, and Parliament was forced to deal with these problems and enact reform or face revolutions on the island, something no one in power wanted to face.

Intellectually and politically, this was, therefore, a time of dramatic change. Classic Liberalism, a conservative approach to government and the economy, which espoused a hands-off method of rule and regulation, was coming into confrontation with a more modern form of liberalism, that which we now associate with heavy government involvement in the economy and in the lives of those upon whom the economy rests, the workers. Michael Michie seeks to place Alison’s role within this confusing period and show that he was a part of both ideological worlds through an examination of the environment in which Alison was raised and a subsequent exposition of Alison’s writings during the period.

One of the greatest influences on Alison was Adam Smith’s writings. Smith provided Alison with a worldview of a largely agricultural world, a free running industrial sector, and one wherein there were bound to be people at the bottom of the ladder as surely there must be those who sat atop the ladder. Of greater
influence, perhaps, was Alison's father, an Episcopalian minister whose grounding was firmly in the Scottish Enlightenment and who had a strong sense of moral duty. Michie draws the picture of a man in whom, then, were combined conservative views and an awareness of the ugliness in society produced by the Industrial Revolution. Consequently, Alison wanted to see the improvement of all sectors of society, but he wanted them maintained within the hierarchical framework of the previous centuries (22). He believed that the social ladder should have as many gradations as possible so as to encourage improvement, a striving to move up the ladder, as well as serving as a deterrent to a boom in population among labourers, for too many mouths would prevent that upward climb (100). According to Alison, his primary goal was “to warn his age of 'the consequences of democratic ascendancy upon the civil condition'” (130). Through an examination of Alison's writings on population, law, and reform, Alison emerges a “transitional figure in a transitional age,” as Michie aptly puts it (198).

It is this argument for a transitional figure between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Michie so convincingly presents. Alison is typical of any such figure in such a time of change. Reared on old school values and knowledge, he is thrust into a new set of circumstances and is forced to adapt, but without wanting to completely abandon his beliefs, which in this case were so rooted in a Christian moralist context. Alison seems to have felt bound to his self-appointed
mission by moral obligation. In proving his case, Michie is ever mindful of contextualizing Alison’s personal experiences with the greater historical picture. Throughout, Michie presents as many opposing as supporting arguments contemporary with Alison to show just how this particular man fits into the total view. Furthermore, Michie is capable of making an honest evaluation of Alison’s character, being the first to point out his failings as well as his achievements (89).

Perhaps because this was not something that Alison did so well, Michie was less apt in the final section of the book where he is trying to prove that Alison’s perspective was ‘Scottish’. While Michie does well in extracting Alison from the stereotypical label of Country Tory, he does not do so well proving that Alison’s experience was a uniquely Scottish one. Anyone familiar with the nineteenth century in Britain would recognize many similarities between Alison and a host of others throughout the island nation caught in this period of rapid change, both economically and politically. For example, many deplored the state of the labouring masses and wanted to see some improvement, yet they were unwilling to let loose the hierarchy which kept these masses where they were.

In the end, Michie calls Alison’s contribution to a nationalist viewpoint “frustrating” (197). It comes through more than it ought to in Michie’s own presentation. It might have worked better in this otherwise well-argued book to integrate Alison’s Scottish nationalism throughout the book, which would have perhaps kept the reader
aware that this was about the effects of the Scottish Enlightenment on Alison.

Ultimately, however, this biography of Archibald Alison is a useful addition to the historiography on early nineteenth-century Britain. Michie presents us with a case study of how these grand ideas of conservatism and liberalism can meet within the same being and how they might be played out in the mind of what was a very human being, Sir Archibald Alison. Furthermore, given the fact that we are in our own period of transition from one century to the next, this is a timely publication with issues of relevance for today about understanding rapid intellectual, political and economic shifts.

Anna K. Truman
Hebrew Union College