It is notable that two of the books Roy Porter wrote late in his shortened life, *The Enlightenment* and *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, were the ones he cared about most – or so he told friends and colleagues at the time. More clearly than in many of his other works, they show him engaging with age-old problems about the nature of humanity: the relationships between mind and body, reason and flesh, spiritual journeys and material conditions, the conscious self that senses its ability to make free choices and the passionate will that knows it is trapped by nature’s laws. From this perspective, it is easy to see why he turned to the study of the history of medicine with such enthusiasm after being persuaded to come to the Wellcome Institute in 1979, for not only were medical people themselves often impelled to consider such problems carefully and to write about them suggestively, but a range of topics within the medical field brought them into relief. Were diseases caused by forces beyond our control or by bad behaviour? Were institutions like the early modern madhouse really meant to care for their inmates, to salve the consciences of the great and the good, or to remove difficult characters from families and communities? Did medical innovations lead to better health or line the pockets of those who sold the treatments? The whole range of life – from comedy to tragedy, from money-grubbing to sincere philanthropy, from material interests to religious persuasion, from biology to philosophy – is at the medical historian’s disposal, and for someone with an appetite for historical curiosities as large as Roy’s, and for cocking a snoot at the overly self-assured, medical history was a playground. Or at least it was for a while, as long as Roy could make use of medical sources while not getting trapped in explanations of the minutiae of medical developments themselves. What he said about medicine in an interview in 1997 is revealing, for he considered economy and philosophy to be more important:

> More and more money is going into producing fewer and fewer results. At the end of the next century, we won’t look back and praise medicine.
for being one of the saviours of humanity. In the future, it will probably be economics that saves the world, or philosophy. I don’t know. But not medicine.²

That view applied just as well to earlier periods, for he rarely celebrated the development of a new and effective treatment for a disease and often tended (too easily, I think) to consider all early modern medical treatments equally ineffective or even harmful. For a while, documents related to medicine provided grist for his mill. But he never considered medicine to be the centre of the world. It was, rather, an aspect of his concern to explore the human condition in body as well as intellect.

Roy’s huge and varied corpus shows him to have been a historian preoccupied by a grand, twofold project: to get to the bottom of some of the most profound expressions of human thought over the course of the ‘long eighteenth century’ and to puzzle out how the persons who penned such ideas interacted with the rapidly changing world around them. Or, to put it more simply, at the time he began writing history, before the term ‘cultural history’ had currency, he shared in the attempt of many of his contemporaries to unite a history of thought with socio-economic history. It also seems clear that at heart Roy gave more attention to the history of thought than to socio-economic changes – at least in his early and late work. He was also far too appreciative of the individuality, creativity and intellect of his subjects ever to consider their work to be determined by the socio-economic conditions of their worlds.³ His writing is most satisfying when it connects self-conscious expression to the world in which it was written down, usually through biography, as in his essay on William Hunter, his book on Edward Gibbon or the countless persons who populate his larger histories.⁴ This also brings into view his love of literature, theatre and music. When it came to deciding about the priority of general causes, then, Roy’s writings seldom gave firm guidance, for he revelled in the complexities and ambiguities of the mixing of multiple personal lives without the need to reduce his accounts to single causes. This was one of his great strengths as a historian, for Roy was truly impressive in the breadth and depth of his knowledge, and in his eclectic appetite for all kinds of history writing, which also made him a supportive mentor and generous critic. But he was neither the founder of a school of history nor an aspirant for such a role. His analyses were rooted in persons and moments rather than in structures.

In this essay, then, I simply want to show by a few examples why I think this is a correct reading of the range and quality of Roy’s work, and so challenge those who pigeonhole him as a ‘social historian of medicine’. He consistently shied away from explaining humans as motivated mainly by one set of ambitions or another, whether homo oeconomicus or philosophicus. As a result, it is best to think of him as one of a generation of historians who were trying to recover a new vision of the past