

Introduction: The Love of Literary Fame

'HAD HUME DIED at the age of twenty-six his real work in the world would have been done, and his fame irrevocably established'.¹ So wrote Lytton Strachey in a brief piece on Hume collected in *Portraits in Miniature*. By twenty-six Hume had completed the first two volumes of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 'the masterpiece which contains all that is most important in his thought'. The *Treatise*, though, was 'a complete failure', and there followed years of poverty and insignificance. Hume wrote a series of essays on a variety of topics during these years, but there was nothing in those essays that Strachey felt compelled to note or discuss. *The History of England* could not be ignored in the same way. It had had great success in Hume's lifetime, and after his death it remained for many years the standard work on the subject. But it was too typical of its time to be taken seriously now. 'The virtues of a metaphysician are the vices of a historian', declared the author of *Elizabeth and Essex*. 'A generalised, colourless, unimaginative view of things is admirable when one is considering the law of causality, but one needs something else if one is to describe Queen Elizabeth'.² The years following *The History of England* are for Strachey, as for many before and after him, the stuff of anecdote and no more. The corpulent Hume, awkward and tongue-tied in the face of the adulation of Paris, is brought before the reader. So is the corpulent Hume stuck in the mud of the Nor' Loch back in Edinburgh, able, despite his atheism, to recite the Lord's Prayer in order to get help from a passing fishwife. And so is the no longer corpulent Hume making jokes on his deathbed about excuses he might offer Charon to put off death for a little while longer.

Strachey makes it sound as though an intellectual biography of Hume must be, if not pointless, then at least very brief. Hume had, after all, thought all his most important thoughts by the age of twenty-six. During his intellectual maturity, according to Strachey, Hume wrote nothing that any longer had a claim on the reader's attention. And the final period of his life was a time of 'repose'. Today the writings that followed the *Treatise*

are given proper attention. *The History of England*, after a period of neglect that continued until the mid-twentieth century, has readers again. Hume's last years have been shown not to be so empty of intellectual endeavour as Strachey implies. Almost every aspect of Hume's thought, in fact, is now the object of scholarly examination, and there has developed a consensus concerning Hume's intellectual achievement taken as a whole that appears to amount to a complete reversal of Strachey's interpretation. The appearance, however, is deceptive. There is a significant respect in which Strachey's way of reading Hume's intellectual development remains unquestioned. In this Introduction I trace the historical origins of Strachey's view of Hume, and show how its fundamental premise functions as the basis also of more recent work. I then propose a different way of conceiving of Hume's intellectual life. My suggestion is that we take seriously Hume's description of himself as having intended from the beginning to live the life of a man of letters. He is best seen not as a philosopher who may or may not have abandoned philosophy in order to write essays and history, but as a man of letters, a *philosophical* man of letters, who wrote on human nature, on politics, on religion, and on the history of England from 55 BC to 1688. To understand Hume's intellectual biography, therefore, we need to understand what it was to be a man of letters in Britain in the middle of the eighteenth century – and also what was distinctive about Hume's construal of the literary vocation. Having summarized the contents of the chapters of this book, I reflect briefly in conclusion on the story that Hume told about his career as a man of letters in 'My Own Life'.

Approaches to Hume's Intellectual Biography

The first book-length biography of Hume, by Thomas Edward Ritchie, was published in 1807.³ As its reviewers complained, Ritchie's book was little more than a collection of Hume's letters and miscellaneous minor writings and withdrawn essays, along with a connecting narrative largely based on Hume's 'My Own Life'.⁴ In conclusion, though, Ritchie turned from Hume's life to his writings. 'In his literary character', Ritchie wrote, 'Mr. Hume is to be considered, 1. As a *metaphysician*: 2. As a *moralist*: 3. As a *writer on general polity*: and 4. As a *historian*'.⁵ It quickly becomes clear that Ritchie took it to be uncontroversial that considered under the first three of these descriptions, Hume had achieved nothing. Ritchie's

observations and criticisms suggest that he himself was a disciple of Thomas Reid. The premises from which Hume had set out in Book One of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* were, according to Ritchie, ‘essentially wrong’, in so far as they saw Hume take for granted the existence of *ideas* as the immediate objects of perception and thought, and take for granted also the applicability of ‘the laws of matter’ to the operations of the mind. And it was not surprising that from essentially wrong premises Hume came to essentially wrong, because essentially sceptical, conclusions about the mind’s cognitive powers. Even so, Hume’s writings on these topics ‘may be useful, for truth is often elicited and established by the collision of opinion and the boldness of disquisition’.⁶ As for Hume’s writings on morality, they were vitiated by the belief that ‘mere usefulness’ is the basis of virtue. The style of the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* was agreeable enough, and there were lessons on politeness in the book not inferior to those to be found in Chesterfield’s letters to his son – ‘But the seductive picture which Mr. Hume has given of the general principle of *utility* may be reversed by another writer, and perverted to the worst of purposes’.⁷ The essays on commercial and constitutional subjects, Ritchie continued, deserved only superficial notice because they were themselves so superficial. In almost every case, Ritchie observes, Hume devoted about five pages to subjects that had, in the hands of other writers, ‘given rise to volumes’.⁸ There was nothing, in other words, contained in the two volumes of Hume’s *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* that merited attention. No one other than philosophers seeking to learn from his errors would have continued to read Hume had it not been for his much more solid achievement in the field of history. In the *History of England*, Ritchie declared, ‘we every where recognize an indefatigable perseverance in research, a manly independence of thinking, and a happy talent in the discrimination of character’.⁹ The *History* ‘is a source of useful information to the statesman, a noble monument of its author’s talents, and an invaluable bequest to his country’.¹⁰

Ritchie succeeds in making it sound as though all the alarm, anxiety, and outrage caused by Hume in his own day, with respect to religion in particular, had dissipated almost completely in the thirty years since Hume’s death in 1776. The passing of one generation was all that it had taken for the threat that men such as Johnson, Warburton, and Beattie had perceived in Hume’s writings to be felt no longer. The errors

contained in Hume's 'metaphysical' writings were errors still, but they were not dangerous. Rather, they could be seen as a means whereby a better philosophy had been developed. This was the view not only of Ritchie but also of Dugald Stewart in a 'dissertation' on the history of philosophy since the Renaissance written for the fifth (1815–17) edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Hume's *Treatise*, according to Stewart, 'has contributed, either directly or indirectly, more than any other single work to the subsequent progress of the philosophy of the human mind'.¹¹ This could be said without it being implied that any of Hume's conclusions were to be endorsed. As read by Stewart, Hume's 'aim is to establish a universal scepticism, and to produce in the reader a complete distrust in his own faculties. For this purpose he avails himself of the data assumed by the most opposite sects, shifting his ground skilfully from one position to another as best suits the scope of his present argument. With the single exception of Bayle, he has carried this sceptical mode of reasoning farther than any modern philosopher'.¹² Hume's conclusions are 'often so extravagant and dangerous, that he ought to have regarded them as proof of the unsoundness of his data' – and that was precisely how those who came after him did regard them. Hume prepared the way for Reid, and also for Kant – according to Stewart an exponent of an essentially Reidian style of philosophizing. Hume was entirely correct in his arguments showing that belief in fundamental cognitive and practical principles could not be given a rational justification. Where he went wrong was in believing that this was an inherently sceptical conclusion. The 'defect in the evidence of these truths' proceeded, as Stewart saw it, following Reid, 'from their being *self-evident*, and consequently unsusceptible of demonstration'.¹³ Reid's account of the nature and role of self-evident principles of belief made worry about Hume's scepticism unnecessary. For this reason, perhaps, Hume barely featured at all in the writings of the next great representative of the Scottish philosophical tradition, Sir William Hamilton. According to Hamilton, Hume represented a moment of crisis, when philosophers had been forced to choose between two alternatives, 'either of surrendering philosophy as null, or of ascending to higher principles, in order to re-establish it against the sceptical reduction'.¹⁴ The crisis had passed, philosophers like Reid and Kant had chosen ascent to higher principles – and so Hume could be allowed to slip away into the past, even while, 'mediately or immediately', every subsequent philosophical advance had to be referred to him.¹⁵

In Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century, the real question concerning Hume was about his *History of England*. There continued to be confident celebration of, in the words of John Allen in 1825, ‘those general and comprehensive views, that sagacity and judgement, those masterly lessons of political wisdom, that profound knowledge of human nature, that calm philosophy, and dispassionate balancing of opinions, which delight and instruct us in the pages of Hume’.¹⁶ Twenty years later, Henry Brougham could declare that Hume was the first British historian of eminence, ‘decidedly to be praised as having been the first to enter the field with the talents of a fine writer, and the habits of a philosophic enquirer’.¹⁷ His metaphysical writings, on the other hand, were characterized by what Brougham called ‘a love of singularity, an aversion to agree with other men, and particularly with the bulk of the people’ – which was not surprising given that the *Treatise* was written while Hume was ‘at an age when the distinction of differing with the world, the boldness of attacking opinions held sacred by mankind at large, is apt to have most charms for vain and ambitious minds’.¹⁸

But as the decades passed, two waves of criticism were gathering in intensity.¹⁹ On the one hand, Hume was condemned on account of the scantiness of his research and his reliance on printed sources. An important impetus for this line of attack was George Brodie’s 1822 *History of the British Empire*, a reassertion of Whig complaints about Hume as a historian that provided the occasion for further assaults in the same vein by Francis Jeffrey in *The Edinburgh Review* and the young John Stuart Mill in *The Westminster Review*. With apparently devastating thoroughness Brodie sought to show that Hume had failed to make proper use even of those documents that were available to him in the 1750s. ‘[H]aving embarked in his undertaking with a pre-disposition unfavourable to calm inquiry after truth, and being impatient of that unwearied research which . . . with unremitting industry sifts and collates authorities,’ Brodie claimed, Hume ‘allowed his narrative to be directed by his predilections, and overlooked the materials from which it ought to have been constructed’.²⁰ This told Mill that Hume’s *History of England* ‘is really a romance; and bears nearly the same degree of resemblance to any thing which really happened, as *Old Mortality* or *Ivanhoe*’.²¹ To Jeffrey it suggested that Hume’s ‘credit among historians, for correctness of assertion, will soon be nearly as low as it has long been with theologians for orthodoxy of belief’.²² At the same time, Hume came to seem a failure as a historian for a rather different reason – in

fact, precisely because of his calm philosophy and dispassionate balancing of opinions. For Mill a contrast with the new kind of history being written by Thomas Carlyle was all that was necessary to force the point home. Hume fails, Mill argued in a review of Carlyle's *French Revolution: A History*, to present his protagonists as real flesh-and-blood human beings. He leaves us ignorant of what it was like to be them, of what really passed in their minds and excited their hearts.²³ The two waves of criticism broke at the same time, in 1849, when the first volume of Macaulay's *History of England from the Accession of James II* appeared. Macaulay had clearly done a lot more research than Hume had. But also, as one reviewer put it, where Hume, like Gibbon after him, had written for the intellect only, in Macaulay we find 'pictured to ourselves the living and actual reality of the men, and the times, and actions he describes'.²⁴

If one book can be said to have decisively altered the state of the debate about Hume in the nineteenth century, and to have made his philosophy matter once more just as his history began to fade from view, it was Mill's *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865). Despite his hostility to Hume's history writing, and to Hume's politics more generally, Mill was a recognizably Humean philosopher, intent on using 'associationism' to destroy a philosophy – a combination of Reid and Kant – which had supposedly given Hume a definitive answer.²⁵ In the wake of Mill's demolition of Hamilton, Hume's scepticism seemed troubling again. In the mid-1880s, Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison was sure that Hume's real significance had not yet been properly grasped,²⁶ and James Hutchison Stirling argued that Kant had not, in fact, answered Hume.²⁷ In Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), the Reidian reply to Hume was depicted as a failure. On Stephen's account, the fundamental problems exposed by Hume were much more intractable than had been generally acknowledged, and called for solutions that British philosophers of the eighteenth century were unable so much as to conceive of. The moral to be drawn, and the moral that Hume drew, was the necessity of giving up philosophy altogether, and of 'turning entirely to experience'. Hume's ablest contemporaries – Stephen names William Robertson and Gibbon – followed his example in 'abandoning speculation' in favour of history.²⁸ But, Stephen continued, a purely empiricist, or positivist, history was bound to be unsatisfactory. It was doomed by 'an incapacity to recognise the great forces by which history is moulded, and the continuity which gives to it real unity'.²⁹

For the same reason – an inability to see ‘the great forces which bind men together’ – a political philosophy based solely on experience was also impossible. History and political society were both reduced to meaningless collections of facts, with no connecting principles.

In this way Stephen sketched what would prove to be an influential conception of the shape of Hume’s career as an author. Hume began as a philosopher, the story went, but in the *Treatise* reasoned himself into a position which made philosophy look as though it had destroyed itself under the pressure of systematic sceptical argumentation. Therefore, he turned from philosophy to subjects which could be treated purely empirically, such as politics, political economy, and history, but in each case the work that he produced was evidence that, as Stephen put it, his power as a destroyer was much greater than his abilities as a creator.³⁰ Moreover, what prevented him from creating anything worthwhile in politics, political economy, and history was, precisely, the philosophical conclusions which he had come to in the *Treatise*. Hume’s scepticism left him trying to make ropes of sand in his writings on these topics. James McCosh put essentially the same narrative to work in *The Scottish Philosophy . . . from Hutcheson to Hamilton* (1875). The *Treatise*, according to McCosh, was undoubtedly Hume’s major work. ‘He devoted to it all the resources of his mighty intellect’.³¹ But what he discovered in the process was the futility of philosophy as such – conceived of as ‘the science of metaphysics’. Hume, therefore, renounced philosophy and turned to entirely different kinds of questions – on McCosh’s account, to attempting (vainly) to show that ‘there could be a science of ethics (and also of politics) founded on the circumstance, that certain acts are found to be agreeable and useful to ourselves and others’.³² His efforts in his later writings, however, merely showed that ‘[w]hatever merit Hume may have in demolishing error, he has . . . established very little positive truth’.³³ *The History of England* was a monument to Hume’s ‘perseverance in his life plan, in spite of discouragements’, but it would be easy to show ‘that the work, taken as a whole, is an illustration of his metaphysical and ethical theory’.³⁴

This idea that Hume’s intellectual development had two principal phases – the discovery in the *Treatise* of the apparent impossibility of progress in philosophy, followed by the taking up of non-philosophical issues thereafter – was developed comprehensively, and with a large dose of vitriol, by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose in the introductions to their

editions of the *Treatise* (1874) and of *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (1875). For Green and Grose, as for Stephen, what Hume inadvertently showed in the *Treatise* was the necessity of the Kantian revolution in philosophy. Hence ‘the suddenness with which his labours in philosophy came to end’: Hume ‘had brought his criticism of philosophy to a point where, as he saw clearly, negation had done its work, and either he must leave the subject, or else attempt a reconstruction’.³⁵ Grose gave a moralized inflection to his account of what happened next. Lacking both appetite and ability for the work of ‘reconstruction’ in philosophy, Hume succumbed to his appetite for literary fame and devoted himself, by all means possible, to exciting public attention. ‘Few men of letters’, according to Grose, ‘have been at heart so vain and greedy of fame as was Hume’.³⁶ Hume was charged with abandoning philosophy out of ignoble motives by his friends among late nineteenth-century philosophers as well as by his enemies. Echoing Mill’s judgement in his essay on Bentham that Hume was ‘the prince of *dilettanti*’,³⁷ T. H. Huxley, in his book on Hume for the series ‘English Men of Letters’ (1879), regretted Hume’s lack of application. Having seen through to the truth that, as Huxley put it, ‘philosophy is based upon psychology; and that the inquiry into the contents and operations of the mind must be conducted upon the same principles as a physical investigation’, Hume gave up on the whole business, exhibiting as he did so ‘no small share of the craving after mere notoriety and vulgar success, as distinct from the pardonable, if not honourable, ambition for solid and enduring fame’. That is, he forsook ‘philosophical studies’ and took up instead ‘those political and historical topics which were likely to yield, and did in fact yield, a much better return of that sort of success which his soul loved’.³⁸ In his edition of the two *Enquiries* (1894), L. A. Selby-Bigge accused Hume of lacking a philosophical justification for the omissions and additions made as he composed the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. They could be explained only in terms of Hume wanting to make himself more interesting to ‘the *habitués* of coffee-houses’, and of his wanting also to distinguish himself by offending those of a religious turn of mind.³⁹

Thus we see how it was that Lytton Strachey could be so confident that Hume’s real work was done by the time he was twenty-six. This view did not die out when the philosophical commitments that motivated it – broadly Kantian in the case of Stephen and McCosh, Hegelian in the case of Green – became less fashionable, for it survived among the logical

positivists who identified Hume as the progenitor of their programme for the wholesale destruction of ‘metaphysics’ and the transformation of philosophy, strictly distinguished from empirical science, into the a priori analysis of concepts and meanings.⁴⁰ However, it began to be questioned early on in the twentieth century, most notably by Norman Kemp Smith and John Laird. Both set out to undermine the nineteenth century’s view of Hume’s achievement as purely negative and destructive. Both took seriously the programme for a ‘science of man’ described in the introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, and both portrayed that programme as the framework in which all of Hume’s subsequent work needed to be understood. All of Hume’s work, in other words, went together to constitute a unified and systematic study of human nature. This has been a very influential idea in Hume scholarship over the past one hundred years. I believe, however, that it has been just as harmful to serious thought about Hume’s intellectual development as was the view that Hume abandoned philosophy in favour of the pursuit of money and fame.

In two important articles on ‘The Naturalism of Hume’ published in the *Mind* in 1905 and then in *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941), Kemp Smith dismissed the view of Hume as, in Mill’s words, ‘the profoundest negative thinker on record’.⁴¹ Far from being, as Stephen had put it, an ‘absolute sceptic’ who had shown ‘that all reasoning was absurd’,⁴² Hume was, according to Kemp Smith, a philosopher propounding a new theory of human nature. Hume’s scepticism was but a prologue to a revolution in thought whereby the priority of reason over passion was reversed, with reason left subordinated to feeling not only in the domain of morals, as Hutcheson had claimed, but also in the domain of belief considered more generally. This was a complete rejection of ‘the traditional, Platonic-Cartesian view of reason as the supreme legislator for human life’, in favour of the idea that ‘Man, no less than the animals, lives under the tutelage of Nature, and must find in *its* dictates, not in any programme which has to justify itself to reason, the ultimate criteria alike of belief and of action’.⁴³ Kemp Smith’s desire to discredit the late nineteenth-century view of Hume made it necessary for him to consider the question of whether Hume was unduly influenced by unworthy motives in giving up on the *Treatise* in favour of essays and history writing. Kemp Smith argued that he was not. The truth, he suggested, was that, when one considered Hume’s career as a whole, it was the *Treatise*, and in particular Books I and II, that looked anomalous. Hume was interested above all in the connection

between philosophy and what Kemp Smith terms ‘general life’. His ideal was philosophy conceived of as ‘a department of literature, accessible to all intelligent readers, and in living contact with contemporary thought’. Such a philosophy had its origins in moral philosophy and concerned itself principally with ‘criticism, political theory, economics, and what is so closely bound up with them, especially with morals and political theory, the study of history’. These matters were the object of Hume’s earliest ‘programme of work’. This was what one must infer, at any rate, from Hume’s ‘repeated assertion that his mental interests, from his earliest years, were equally divided between *belles lettres* and philosophy, and that literature, as he tells us, was the passion of his life and the source of his chief enjoyments’. The years spent on Books I and II of the *Treatise* saw Hume ‘temporarily deflected from the path which he had marked out for himself’.⁴⁴

According to Kemp Smith, it was with moral philosophy that Hume began, and Hume’s career after the *Treatise* could be seen as proceeding in conformity with the ‘teaching’ of Book III. It made perfect sense that he moved from there to political and economic problems, ‘and in natural sequence to the application of his political theory in the writing of his *History*’.⁴⁵ All that Hume wrote, in other words, developed out of his earliest philosophical insights. So what remains in place in Kemp Smith’s version of Hume’s intellectual biography is, first, the belief that the earliest phase of Hume’s career was the most important, and, second, that everything else is to be understood in terms of its relations with that first phase. These ideas can be seen at work also in John Laird’s *Hume’s Philosophy of Human Nature* (1932). Laird asserted that Strachey was guilty only of some exaggeration in his claim that all Hume’s real work was done by the time he was twenty-six. Everything that Hume wrote in later life, ‘not excepting the *History* and the discussions of religion’, had ‘obvious roots’ in the pre-*Treatise* period. That period, therefore, required a more extensive discussion than the whole of the rest of Hume’s life.⁴⁶ When Laird turned in his final chapter to Hume’s politics, economics, history, and criticism, it was with a view to considering how far they showed Hume to have completed, in the fullness of time, ‘his design of a science of human nature’.⁴⁷ It could with some justification be said, in fact, that Laird’s particular version of how Hume’s early years shaped his later writings proved more influential than Kemp Smith’s. For while few Hume scholars accepted Kemp Smith’s story of Hume having taken his