HUME

This is the first book to provide a comprehensive overview of the entire career of one of Britain's greatest men of letters. It sets in biographical and historical context all of Hume's works, from *A Treatise of Human Nature* to *The History of England*, bringing to light the major influences on the course of Hume's intellectual development and paying careful attention to the differences between the wide variety of literary genres with which Hume experimented. The major events in Hume's life are fully described, but the main focus is on Hume's intentions as a philosophical analyst of human nature, politics, commerce, English history, and religion. Careful attention is paid to Hume's intellectual relations with his contemporaries. The goal is to reveal Hume as a man intensely concerned with the realization of an ideal of open-minded, objective, rigorous, dispassionate dialogue about all the principal questions faced by his age.

James A. Harris is Professor of the History of Philosophy at the University of St. Andrews. He is the author of *Of Liberty and Necessity: The Free Will Debate in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy* (2005) and of articles on Hume, Hutcheson, Reid, Beattie, Priestley, and various themes in eighteenth-century British philosophy. He is the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century* (2013) and coeditor, with Aaron Garrett, of *Scottish Philosophy in the Age of Enlightenment: Volume One* (2015).

Hume

An Intellectual Biography

James A. Harris
University of St. Andrews

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Preface

This is, so far as I know, the first intellectual biography of Hume. It is an attempt to give a complete picture of Hume's ideas as they are expressed in the full range of his writings on philosophical, political, historical, economic, literary, and religious subjects. The focus is almost exclusively on published texts because that is, for the most part, all we have to go on. There survives only a tiny amount of the very large quantity of notebooks that Hume must have filled with quotations, questions, and reflections during the course of his life. There are manuscripts for just two of his major works: *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, and *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Accession of Henry VII*. He does not seem to have kept a journal. Fewer than 800 of the thousands of letters that Hume must have written are extant, and most of them shed little light on the origins and refinement of his ideas. Approximately two-thirds of them date from the 1762–76 period, during which Hume published almost no new work of real significance. He never taught at a university, so there are no lecture notes taken by students. He gave papers to a number of literary societies and philosophical clubs, but there is no detailed record of the ideas that he tried out in such contexts. The autobiography he wrote shortly before he died is very brief, and by his own admission contains little more than 'a history of my writings'. It is very difficult indeed, therefore, to get behind the printed texts and discover the mind of the man who wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature*, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects, The History of England*, and *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion.* Hume did his best to ensure that all that remained of him after his death were his published works, and was very successful in the attempt. Nevertheless, this book is more than a summary account of what Hume said about what and when he said it. It relates Hume's works to the circumstances in which they were conceived and written, and to the debates to which those works were presumably intended to contribute, and hazards a series of conjectures as to what

Hume's intentions were in writing in the particular ways that he did about human nature, politics, economics, history, and religion.

I do not offer a unified interpretation of Hume's intellectual achievement considered as a whole. As I explain in the Introduction, I do not believe that Hume had a single project to which all, or even most, of his works might be said to contribute. There is no evidence that the hugely ambitious plan of work announced in the introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that of a 'compleat system of the sciences' built upon the foundation a new 'science of man', survived Hume's abandonment of the *Treatise* in favour of essay writing. This does not mean, though, that Hume's late nineteenth-century critics were correct in claiming that Hume had abandoned philosophy in order to satisfy an inordinate appetite for fame. It makes more sense, I think, to take Hume to have conceived of himself from the beginning as a *man of letters* of a particular kind. He was not exactly what his contemporary James Ralph called 'a writer by profession or trade'. Unlike Johnson, he did no journalism, and never compiled, edited, or translated at the behest of a publisher. Independence was an important part of his conception of the literary life. He wanted to be able to write about what he wanted to write about, in the way he wanted to be able to write about it, without interference from a patron, a political master, or a bookseller. He also wanted to be free from the demands of a particular profession. I do not think Hume wanted to be a philosophy professor any more than he wanted to be a lawyer. He had many and various interests, and pursuing them required a liberty impossible to combine with the duties, educational and pastoral, of an eighteenth-century university professor. His interests as explored in his books do not fit together to form an organized system. What unifies his works is the disengaged, sceptical, philosophical frame of mind of their author.

It should be emphasized here at the outset that what I have written does not pretend to be a biography in the proper sense of the word. Several important episodes of Hume's life I say little or nothing about. I do not give anything like a full account of the periods Hume spent in continental Europe with James St Clair between 1746 and 1748, nor do I attempt a detailed reconstruction of Hume's time as Secretary to the British Embassy in Paris between 1763 and 1766. I cover the final fifteen years of Hume's life in a single chapter. The reader looking for the real story of Hume's relations with the Comtesse de Boufflers, or a blow-by-blow description of the disastrous breakdown of his friendship

with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, will be disappointed. So also will the reader looking for a retelling of those many and by now very familiar anecdotes on which his reputation as scourge of the Christian religion largely rests. The best place to start for someone with an interest in Hume's life considered as a whole, and not just in his career as an author, remains Ernest Campbell Mossner's *The Life of David Hume*, first published in 1954, and reissued in a second, corrected edition in 1980. Some, but not much, new biographical information has come to light since 1980. Several of Mossner's hypotheses appear on close inspection to have little or no evidence to support them. The book is animated by a very lively affection for its subject – an affection which occasionally gets in the way of a properly dispassionate examination of the historical facts. Even so, as an account of Hume's life, it has no serious rival.

Mossner says in his preface that he writes 'for a reader less interested in the ideas than in the man'. This book, by contrast, is written for the reader less interested in the man than in the ideas, the arguments made in defence of the ideas, and the language in which the arguments were couched. It will surely not be the last attempt at an intellectual biography of Hume. Each episode that I discuss, from Hume's education at Edinburgh in the early 1720s to the publication of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* three years after his death in 1779, merits a closer and more extensive examination than I have given it. My account might be thought of as something like a preliminary journey through some extremely difficult terrain. And as I have made that journey, I have been heavily reliant upon the scholarship of others. To a significant extent this is a work of synthesis, made possible by the remarkable advances that have been made since the 1960s in the understanding of the intellectual history of the eighteenth century. I indicate my most important debts in my footnotes. The reader should be aware, though, that my footnotes do not attempt anything like a full survey and assessment of the secondary literature on Hume. That would be the work of a lifetime. Nor do I use the footnotes to register and explain all my disagreements with other scholars on this or that point of interpretation. In this I follow Hume's own example. 'Controversy, however civilly conducted, has unavoidably something harsh in its nature', he told Andrew Millar in 1755. There will doubtless be occasions in the future for explanation and defence of the readings offered here.

I was offered the opportunity of writing an intellectual biography of Hume for Cambridge University Press in early 2003. My first editor,

Terry Moore, died before I got started. It fell to Beatrice Rehl to see this book through to publication, and I am grateful to her and to Isabella Vitti for their patience and for the good advice they have offered me. Diane Aronson and Rachel Cox have been extremely efficient production editors, and I am grateful to them too. Thanks are due also to Pooja Bhandari and her team for their work on the text.

It would have taken me even longer to write the book had I not been granted substantial periods of research leave by the School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies at the University of St. Andrews. I thank two Heads of School, Peter Clark and Katherine Hawley, for releasing me from my teaching and administrative duties. I am grateful in particular for having been granted the early sabbatical semester in the autumn of 2014 that has enabled me to bring the project to completion. I also thank the following institutions for providing the financial support that made time away from St. Andrews possible: The Leverhulme Trust, which awarded me a Research Fellowship for the academic year 2009–10; The Arts and Humanities Research Council, which awarded me a Fellowship (AH/I022759/1) for the academic year 2011–12; and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where I was a member for the academic year 2012–13. At the Institute I was made welcome by the School of Historical Studies, and by Jonathan Israel in particular. It was an immense privilege to be part of such a distinguished academic community. I was Hans Kohn Member at the Institute, and I would like to express my gratitude to the Kohn family for their great generosity.

As I have worked on this book, I have received much assistance from others in the field. I would like especially to thank Alexander Broadie, Roger Emerson, Knud Haakonssen, James Moore, Nicholas Phillipson, John Robertson, M. A. Stewart, Paul Wood, and John Wright for their advice and support. The encouragement of these senior members – as I hope they will not mind being called – of the community of historians of eighteenth-century Scottish thought has been invaluable. Roger Emerson and John Robertson read a draft of the book for Cambridge University Press and wrote detailed reports which prompted revisions both large and small. They will probably both wish that the changes I made in response to their comments had been more extensive still. Robert Mankin, Emilo Mazza, Nicholas Phillipson, Mikko Tolonen, Wayne Waxman, Carl Wennerlind, Kenneth Winkler, and John Wright also read the book in manuscript, and gave me extremely useful advice. I know how difficult it

is to find the time to read and comment on a text as long as this one, and I am deeply grateful to all of them. In an act of great generosity, David Womersley provided invaluable proofreading skills during the production stage of this book. I also need to thank those who have taken the trouble to answer my questions and requests for information. At a minimum, they are: Thomas Ahnert, Donald Ainslie, Peter Anstey, Moritz Baumstark, Richard Bourke, Mark Box, Sarah Broadie, Janet Brown, Vivienne Brown, Paddy Bullard, Dario Castiglione, Alix Cohen, Paul Davis, Thomas Dixon, Simon Grote, Colin Heydt, Tom Jones, Mark Jurdjevic, Tony La Vopa, Alexander Long, Neil McArthur, Peter Millican, Dario Perinetti, Adam Potkay, David Raynor, Isabel Rivers, Eric Schliesser, Richard Serjeantson, Richard Sher, Mark Spencer, M. A. Stewart, David Womersley, and Bill Zachs. I am sure that there were others, and I wish I had kept a better record of this kind of assistance. All these people have helped to reduce the number of errors of fact and interpretation that this book contains, but, of course, those that remain are entirely my responsibility.

My interest in eighteenth-century British letters might have had its origins in tutorials with Roger Lonsdale while I was an undergraduate studying English at Balliol College, Oxford. I fear, though, that I made far too little of the opportunities that those tutorials presented. I was introduced to Hume by Wayne Waxman while I was a graduate student at the New School for Social Research. After I returned to Oxford to do first a BPhil and then a DPhil in philosophy, I talked about Hume often with David Wiggins and with Galen Strawson. My first steps into the wider world of Hume scholarship were facilitated by the annual conferences of The Hume Society, and I would like to record here my admiration for the care and attention given by the Hume Society and its officers to those at the outset of academic careers. The egalitarian and friendly atmosphere of the conferences that the Society hosts around the world is remarkable, and must be in large part responsible for the flourishing state of Hume studies today.

Most of my work on this book, both the research and the writing, was done in the National Library of Scotland on George IV Bridge in Edinburgh. The NLS remains what Thomas Carlyle said it was – incomparably the best of all the libraries we have in Scotland. There is, in fact, no other place where this book could have been written, and I am thankful to the staff of the NLS for their endless courtesy and helpfulness. I thank also

the staff of the Historical Studies and Social Sciences Library at the Institute for Advanced Study, the Firestone Library at Princeton University, and the Special Collections department of Edinburgh University Library.

Mikko Tolonen and I have talked about Hume more or less continuously while I have been writing this book, often – but not often enough – over beer in The Bow Bar here in Edinburgh. I have had many conversations about Hume, and about much else to do with eighteenth-century philosophy, with Aaron Garrett. To Mark and Anna Harris, and to Adam, Tom, and Johnny, many thanks are due for their unfailing hospitality in Crail. Bruce Taylor has, as always, been a source of reassurance and laughter, even though he lives far too far away. Josh de la Mare has generously asked for summaries of recent progress during our annual expeditions in the Scottish Highlands. Chris Wells has often been a gracious host in London. A special mention is due to Lincoln Ellis, who has seldom refrained during our transatlantic telephone conversations from reminding me just how long it has taken to get this book done.

I began proper work on Hume's intellectual biography in the autumn of 2009. At about the same time I met Jennifer Brown in Edinburgh's Usher Hall as we waited for the start of a concert by the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra. Over the course of the past five years or so Jennifer and I have got married and had two children, Florence and Albert. Soon after Florence was born, Jennifer left her family and friends behind to spend eight months in Princeton so that I could finish a first draft of this book at the Institute for Advanced Study. Nor was that the end of the things she has had to put up with. This book is for her.

Edinburgh
December 2014

Textual Note

Because the development of Hume's ideas through time is a principal concern of this book, I quote from original eighteenth-century editions of Hume's works. Usually the particular copies I have used are those held by the National Library of Scotland. Most (though not all) eighteenth-century editions of Hume's works are available for inspection on the Gale Artemis Eighteenth-Century Collections Online database. In Hume's early works, all nouns are capitalized. His later works conform with modern practice in capitalizing only proper nouns. In line with Hume's considered view on this matter, and to make my text easier on the modern eye, I have silently removed capitalizations of non-proper nouns from quotations of early works. Original spelling, punctuation, and italicization have, however, been retained. Frequent reference is made to, and quotations are often taken from, works that I believe Hume can be presumed to have read. It is usually impossible to say with any certainty exactly which editions of these works Hume read, and I sometimes quote from standard modern editions. In the interests of uniformity, I have removed old-fashioned capitalizations from these texts as well.