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David Hume: The Philosopher as Historian

A Review by Richard Kleer
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Judging a book by its cover would give especially misleading results in this case. From its title, readers might expect a general introduction to Hume's scholarly work. Instead, they will get an account mainly of Hume the historian. The volume was originally commissioned as part of "a series of short books by historians writing about their favourite historians" (5). First published by Avon (in Britain) and St. Martin's (in the United States), it is now reprinted by Penguin and Yale. The rerelease may have a lot to do with the apparent popularity (judging by the many reviews, at least) of Phillipson's volume on Adam Smith, released by the same two publishers in 2010. The new edition is very much like the old. The most noticeable change is the addition of a few pages in the final chapter about why Hume eventually decided not to add to his *History of England* a volume on the reigns of William III and Anne.

Phillipson positions Hume's *History* as the practical fruition of a lifelong campaign to preserve civilization in Britain by teaching its citizens to rise above faction, xenophobia, and religion in order to think calmly and rationally about their constitution. He sees Hume as heir to Defoe, Addison, and Steele, who strove, he alleges, to develop a language of politeness that would improve the manners of their numerous readers. But Hume did not think good manners sufficient to preserve

civilization. He wanted to go further and encourage rational discussion of politics and history as well: "Only then would it be possible to unscramble the ideological confusions and enthusiasms which had fuelled the factionalism of Walpolean politics and that continued later in the eighteenth century to threaten Britain with the prospect of revolutionary unrest" (27).

The book's subtitle—"The Philosopher as Historian"—is no accident. Phillipson maintains that Hume's historical writing was built from an analytical foundation set out in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Loathing the false certainties of Christianity, Hume sought in the *Treatise* to show that beliefs, theological and otherwise, originated in imagination and everyday experience. Constitutions too rested on contingent beliefs—mere opinions formed over time about the appropriateness and necessity of obeying political authority. So if people wanted to understand themselves and their societies, they needed to study history.

Hume began the move from theory to practice with his *Essays, Moral and Political*, seeking to translate his metaphysical position into party-political language. The most natural form of government was monarchical, not a mixed constitution. Government was supported not by abstract constitutional principles but by considerations of interest and habit. All governments were originally established by force and sustained by a deference that had become habitual. It was religious enthusiasm that had dislodged the monarchy, not a failure of the royals to honor an original contract with the people. Modern politicians needed corruption to forge a degree of the natural deference that had been destroyed by factionalism.

Having failed to win popular acclaim for his *Essays*, Hume sought to teach the same practical lessons in a more popular and accessible manner by writing a new history of England in which James I attempted to rule on the basis of an abstract theory of divine right, failing to understand that the absolute obedience Elizabeth had won was owing to her mastery of the politics of consent. The Petition of Right to which Charles I was forced to agree in 1628 likewise rested on the pure fiction of original consent, which was the recent invention of Puritan enthusiasm. Civil war was inevitable. Elizabeth, by contrast, succeeded by deliberately

and carefully protecting her people as much as possible from the strains that theological controversy threatened to thrust on them. It was her prudent governance, not providence, that had preserved England from the religious wars roiling the continent. The feudal constitution was not the font of political liberty Hume's contemporaries had made of it. Originally built to preserve the personal authority of kings who led a highly militaristic society, it could not support any movements toward a more impersonal system of justice. Instead, with each king's death, the country collapsed into schism and disorder. In such a world, liberty was best preserved not by undermining kings but by supporting their claims to absolute power.

I do not find persuasive Phillipson's attempt to position Hume's historical writing as an exercise in refining the tastes of the middling ranks or in working out the practical consequences of his theory of politics and history. The scarlet thread running throughout Hume's work is more likely his iconoclasm; always he wrote against the prepossessions of his day. The *Treatise* established that reason was not the queen of human nature, the *Essays* (among many other things) that corruption had a legitimate role to play in politics, the *Enquiry* that morals were not divinely ordained, and the *History* that the broad sweep of English history could not be told as a story about the ebb and flow of an ancient constitution. Of any broader and more systematic aims than this we should follow Hume's lead and remain skeptical.

Phillipson is at his best when writing of Hume's *History*. He helps us understand what would have stood out for Hume's contemporaries when reading that book. "The history of civilization in England could no longer be told in terms of the fortunes of an ancient constitution. It was now the story of a nation whose people's political behaviour had been shaped by laws and customs, by property, religion and culture, and by the securities and insecurities of the ages in which they lived" (133). Phillipson's book also serves well in whetting our appetite to read the *History of England* ourselves.