

David Hume and America

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## DAVID HUME AND AMERICA

BY JOHN M. WERNER

The transformation in thought and loyalties that turned thirteen British provinces into one nation has been observed from numerous viewpoints; likewise, the impact of David Hume upon his age also has been elucidated. One question, however remains to be answered: to what extent, if any, did the writings of the man who destroyed the Lockean concept of the social contract theory work an influence upon Americans of the Revolutionary generation, immersed as they were in whig ideology? The uncertainty inherent in this question is that such "influence" is exceedingly difficult to determine. American writers frequently cited several authorities on one point, making it almost impossible to isolate any individual's exact contribution to their thought. As Charles Hendel has aptly pointed out:

American statesmen . . . were engaged upon their great task of establishing a republic that would endure. There were grave fears and predictions at the time that the new commonwealth would not last. The men who drew up the [various] resolutions, those who spoke at the Federal Convention, as well as the citizens and country gentlemen who had made a Revolution and were now seeking to govern themselves had little time to document their words and identify the sources of their opinion or inspiration. They were constantly referring to the "experience" of the British Constitution, and quite often in the very phrases of Hume, as when Madison spoke of "the republican principle."<sup>1</sup>

And while it is a truism that the formation of the United States did not take place in an intellectual or political vacuum, it is equally true that not every British or Continental intellectual work crossed the Atlantic; David Hume's writings were no exception. The best compromise that can be achieved, therefore, is to attempt to ascertain which of Hume's works were available to the Americans and what use they made of them.

The philosopher's life spanned the gap nicely between the era when one generation of Americans was fighting loyally for the Crown during the War of the Spanish Succession to the time when the next generation of Americans would take up arms against the Crown. This same period saw the last attempts at Scottish independence crushed by the English. Although he was not an active participant in either the

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 26–28; Charles Hendel, ed., *David Hume's Political Essays* (New York, 1953), xlv, xlvii, lvii.

American or the Scottish upheavals, David Hume was affected by both, as is evidenced in some of his later writings.

These years, while unhappy politically, saw Scotland's greatest outpouring of intellectual endeavor. It is referred to accurately as the "Scottish Enlightenment"; David Hume had, of course, been an integral part of it. Indeed, one historian has observed that this epoch could be referred to as "the age of Hume." Another, a well-known intellectual historian, acknowledges Hume as the greatest British philosopher of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> David Hume's ideas mark a turning point in the history of thought in that he abandoned most of the philosophical conceptions of the previous century.

Hume was an empirical philosopher in the tradition of Locke and Berkeley, but, unhampered by theological scruples, Hume was able to draw empiricism out to its logical conclusion—skepticism. What Hume was trying to do was to show that the structure of reality could not be entered merely by rational insight. Hume says that all human knowledge rests on two things: impressions and ideas. Impressions are received by the senses; the ideas corresponding to these impressions are connected in accordance with the causal principle. Any attempt to find some reality underlying these impressions is useless. Reality can be found only in a continuously changing aggregate of feelings bound together by a psychological or social force known as custom. Custom thus replaces *a priori* reason as the subjective basis of beliefs about causation in external and human nature. Hume of course realized that such absolute skepticism was not practical since he had used reasoning to come to the conclusion that all reasoning is absurd. As one modern philosopher has stated, Hume's real problem "was so to use scepticism as to undermine theology and metaphysics, but safeguard science and secular morality." J. A. Passmore has concluded, "Hume's great achievement . . . lies in his contribution to a . . . conception of science, in which speculation, not security, is the key note. . . ." The ultimate impression Hume drew from his philosophy was that one must, of necessity, rely solely on experience. Only experience could accurately decide questions of morality or politics.<sup>3</sup> The concept of experience was an open sesame

<sup>2</sup>W. L. Taylor, *Frances Hutcheson and David Hume as Predecessors of Adam Smith* (Durham, 1965), 5; P. Hume Brown, "Scotland in the Eighteenth Century," *The Scottish Historical Review*, VI (July 1909), 348; Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The Coming of the Revolution* (New York, 1954), 7; Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstances of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II Until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 380.

<sup>3</sup>Stuart N. Hampshire, "Hume's Place in Philosophy," in D. F. Pears, ed., *David Hume: A Symposium* (London, 1963), 4; C. R. Morris, *Locke Berkeley Hume* (London, 1931), 129, 143; Sir Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eigh-*

to the Americans; Patrick Henry referred to experience as a lamp by which the past illuminated the future. Hume's philosophy as a formal system of metaphysical speculation was, however, not well known in America. Americans, concerned with establishing their rights as Englishmen and later their rights to independence, were more concerned with political and historical writings; when Hume moved into these fields the Americans became acquainted with him. Indeed, during his lifetime, Hume enjoyed his greatest earnings and reputation among all peoples as an essayist and historian, not as a philosopher.<sup>4</sup>

Hume regarded history as an essential study, calling it "the greatest mistress of wisdom." He was the first of the British philosophical historians, although his friends William Robertson and Edward Gibbon soon followed, writing history from the same perspective. These men believed history was an intellectual exercise aimed at social analysis; and furthermore, they felt that philosophy and history complemented each other. History traced the development of the human mind. This same human mind provided the materials from which the philosopher derived the principles of thinking and conduct.<sup>5</sup> The close connection between philosophy and history is emphasized in a passage from the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

Its [history's] chief Use is only to discover the constant and universal Principles of human Nature, by shewing Men in all Varieties of Circumstances and Situations, and furnishing us with Materials, from which we may form our Observations, and become acquainted with the regular Springs of human Action and Behaviour. These Records of Wars, Intrigues, Factions, and Revolutions, are so many Collections of Experiments, by which the Politician or moral Philosopher fixes the Principles of his science; in the same Manner as the Physician or natural Philosopher becomes acquainted with the Nature of Plants, Minerals, and other external Objects, by the Experiments, which he forms concerning them.<sup>6</sup>

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*teenth Century*, 2 vols. (New York, 1962), I, 1, 36–37; D. G. C. MacNabb, *David Hume: His Theory of Knowledge and Morality* (New York, 1966<sup>2</sup>), 5–6; J. A. Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (Cambridge, 1952), 154; Carmin Mascia, *A History of Philosophy* (Paterson, 1957), 326. For a different view of Hume's relationship to Locke and Berkeley, see Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1949), 78–85.

<sup>4</sup>H. Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1965), xi; Pears, ed., *David Hume: A Symposium*, 6. Hume himself moved from an interest in so-called "pure" philosophy toward a larger conception in which a genuine grasp of human nature would be combined with an intelligent direction of all human endeavors. In short, Hume anticipated modern social scientists.

<sup>5</sup>Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience*, 5; Ernest C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Austin, 1954), 301.

<sup>6</sup>David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Essays*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (New York, 1963), 86.

Read in a day when the intense passions surrounding the appellations and policies of whig and tory have disappeared, Hume's *History of England* seems remarkably free from political bias; unfortunately, in its early life very few men viewed it in this light. Gavin Hamilton said it was "neither whig nor tory but truly imparshal [sic]." Hamilton was also the first publisher of the *History*, which vitiates somewhat his cold-eyed objectivity. Hume, in *My Own Life*, said the *History* had caused him to be "assailed by . . . [both] Whig and Tory. . . ." A modern writer agrees. John Stewart says Hume's *History* comforted neither whig nor tory and both sides denounced him. In amount of sheer venom, the whigs triumphed; they detested the *History*. Some, like Bishop William Warburton, even labelled it "Jacobite." Horace Walpole came much closer to a perceptive evaluation of the work: "Where others abuse the Stuarts, he [Hume] laughs at them."<sup>7</sup>

There most certainly are passages in the *History* that seem to indicate a definite partiality toward one side or the other. Discussing the reign of Charles I, Hume claimed the king was genuinely sincere in calling his first parliament. Parliament repaid this sincerity by voting him the niggardly sum of £112,000 to prosecute a war and run the government. According to Hume, this was a cruel mockery rather than a serious attempt to support Charles. Hume tempered his support of Charles by remarking that the monarch's later attempts to raise money by various schemes would be regarded even in the most absolute government as "irregular and unequal." And further, the king's general principles were "altogether incompatible with a limited government." At the conclusion of his *History*, Hume reviewed the reigns of the four Stuart kings and observed that the Revolution of 1688 had been advantageous to the nation and since that time Britain had enjoyed not perfect liberty but at least the best known to mankind. Hume then took strenuous exception to the whig writers who pictured the Stuarts as complete devils; as Hume saw it, this was inaccurate and bad history.<sup>8</sup> His own balanced analysis comes much closer to modern historical methods. While we admire this quality in Hume's *History*, many men of the eighteenth century did not; the Americans were no exception.

<sup>7</sup>H. Trevor Colbourn, "John Dickinson, Historical Revolutionary," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXXIII (1959), 282n.; John B. Stewart, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume* (New York and London, 1963), 1, 9; Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 303, 310; Hume, "My Own Life," in Mossner, ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 5. Earl Marischal Keith once wrote to Hume: "To the highflyers you are . . . a sad whig, to the whigs an hidden Jacobite, and to reasonable men *le bon David*, a Lover of truth." Quoted in V. C. Chappell, ed., *Hume* (New York, 1966), 34.

<sup>8</sup>Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James the Second, 1688*, 6 vols. (Boston, 1850 edition), V, 3, 21, 43; VI, 363–66.

The practical Americans preferred to take their philosophy in historical doses rather than in undiluted abstract treatises; accordingly, Hume's *History* was more familiar to them than most of his other works. Although English editions of *The History of England* were rather common in America, the work's unfortunate tory reputation probably limited somewhat its popularity with whiggish-minded Americans. In 1771, Robert Bell, a colonist who had become very successful in the reprint trade, was unable to secure support for an American edition of the *History*.<sup>9</sup> Probably, many Americans were being influenced by the notoriety surrounding the work instead of specific content. In summarizing the reign of James I, Hume had written:

What chiefly renders the reign of James memorable is the commencement of the English colonies in America, colonies established on the noblest footing that has been known in any age or nation. . . . The spirit of independency, which was reviving in England, here shone forth in its full luster and received new accession from the aspiring character of those who, being discontented with the established church and monarch, had sought for freedom amidst those savage deserts. . . .<sup>10</sup>

It is true, however, that elsewhere Hume did make statements which failed to endear him to some individuals on this side of the water. Like the Austrian eagle, Hume seems to be looking two ways at once. His reference to Puritan "cant, hypocrisy, and bigotry" would not have been read with equanimity by many New Englanders. The eminent Massachusetts theologian Jonathan Edwards averred that he was "glad of an opportunity to read such corrupt books, especially when written by men of considerable genius." Elsewhere, Hume's observations on the English civil wars were bound to be distasteful to a people busily engaged in their own revolution in government: "the sacred boundaries of the laws being once violated, nothing remained to confine the wild projects of zeal and ambition"; and again, "it is seldom that the people gain anything by revolutions in government; because the new government, jealous and insecure, must commonly be supported with more expense and severity than the old. . . ." Hume also carried his assault upon the notion of the original contract over into his historical writing when he observed, "that the people are the origin of all just power . . . is belied by all history and experience."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Charles Evans, *American Bibliography: A Chronological Dictionary of all Books, Pamphlets, and Periodical Publications printed in the United States of America from the Genesis of printing in 1639 down to and including the year 1820* (New York, 1941), IV, sec. 11984; Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience*, 19.

<sup>10</sup>Hume, *History of England*, 6 vols. (New York, 1885 edition), IV, 369.

<sup>11</sup>Charles Hendel, *Hume's Political Essays*, lv; Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians In Colonial America* (New York, 1968), 91; Hume, *History of England* (1885 edition), V, 219, 248, 370.

The dichotomy in *The History* is more apparent than real; in these passages Hume was not addressing himself to the question of the American colonies and their relationship to the mother country. At the time, these great issues had yet to be raised. What Hume was doing in his *History* was simply using the past to illustrate what he assumed to be the eternal verities of his earlier philosophical and political writings. It is well to remember that for eighteenth-century man, politics, even more than philosophy, walked hand-in-hand with history. Since this was true, Hume's political essays were almost as well known to the Americans as was his *History*.<sup>12</sup>

According to Hume, a state is a relationship combining individual liberty and authority. A good state is one which maintains a proper balance between these two elements. A government represents the authority in a state. Hume sees four major principles by which governments should be bound so as not to transgress their authority. First, subjects should obey their proper governors. The emphasis here is on the word "proper." A government can only expect obedience when it is the properly constituted authority. Secondly, the government is to do its job. The government has no independent purpose, goal, or commission of its own; rather it exists only to advance the common purpose of all its subjects. Hume's third principle relates to government activity: the government is to be neutral, equal, and impartial in its penalties, judgments, positive laws, and activities. Finally, the government is to govern in as calculable a manner as possible. This means that the people should know with a reasonable degree of certainty what the government will do in any given set of circumstances. In the essay "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science," Hume observed "that tho' free governments have been commonly the most happy for those who partake of their freedom, yet they are the most ruinous and oppressive to their provinces."<sup>13</sup> Americans could agree easily with this as the imagined English oppression was an obvious case in point.

These premises, in addition to other aspects of Hume's political thought—a belief that a form of government may be changed when the good of society demands it; a strong emphasis on freedom of the press; a non-hereditary second chamber for the legislature—seem to indicate that Hume would prove to be an able spokesman for the colonial cause.<sup>14</sup> He was just this in many cases; the pity is that more

<sup>12</sup>Stewart, *Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume*, 1; Hendel, *Hume's Political Essays*, viii, xxvii.

<sup>13</sup>Stewart, *Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume*. This summary of Hume's political thought was gleaned by Stewart from all of Hume's works. Hendel, *Hume's Political Essays*, 15.

<sup>14</sup>Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, 217; Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London, 1758), 6.



of the American leadership could not overcome their narrow political prejudices and rely on Hume more often.

David Hume was, of course, more than a writer; he was a man with definite political responses which have been too often ignored. Hume was a peaceful man who never made a public attempt to vindicate himself in the face of opponents' onslaughts. Hume styled himself a political moderate; his view of *things* corresponded more to whig principles, while his view of *persons* conformed to tory prejudices.<sup>15</sup> By the time it became obvious that a serious crisis was brewing in America, Hume had ceased writing for publication. His correspondence, nevertheless, reveals his feelings regarding America.

In a letter to the Earl of Hertford written on February 27, 1766, Hume announced his pleasure at the repeal of the Stamp Act. But in another letter written to the Earl in May of the same year, Hume was concerned because the Americans (relying on Pitt's speech in parliament on their behalf) now seemed anxious to push their demands much further than originally intended. Hume said if reports from America were true only Pitt seemed capable either of getting the Americans to submit peaceably to his authority or subduing them by his vigor. Hume added that in any case he no longer felt repeal of the Stamp Act would suffice.<sup>16</sup>

Hume's opinion toward America changed rapidly. In 1768 Hume said he longed to see America totally in revolt. He offered this same wish again in a letter to William Strahan the following year. By late winter, 1771, Hume could see nothing but ruin ahead for the British nation and did not think the union with America would last much longer.<sup>17</sup> In another letter to Strahan written in 1774, Hume reminisced over some repartee with a lord:

I remember, one day, at Lord Bathurst's, the Company, among whom, was his Son, the present Chancellor, were speaking of American Affairs; and some of them mention'd former Acts of Authority exercised over the Colonies. I observed to them, that Nations, as well as Individuals, had their different Ages, which challeng'd a different Treatment. For Instance, My Lord, said I to the old Peer, you have sometimes no doubt, given your Son a Whipping; and I doubt not, but it was well merited and did him much good: Yet you will not think proper at present to employ the Birch: The Colonies are no longer in their Infancy. But yet, I say to you, they are still in their Nonage;

<sup>15</sup>Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 311.

<sup>16</sup>David Hume to the Earl of Hertford, Feb. 27, 1766, and May 8, 1766, J. Y. T. Greig, ed., *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932), II, 22, 42-43. Hereafter cited as *Hume's Letters*.

<sup>17</sup>Hume to Sir Gilbert Elliott of Minto, July 22, 1768, *Hume's Letters*, II, 184; Hume to William Strahan, Oct. 25, 1769, and Mar. 1, 1771, *Hume's Letters*, II, 209, 237.



and Dr. Franklyn's [sic] wishes to emancipate them too soon from their mother country.<sup>18</sup>

Hume did not give any indication what year the above exchange took place; but apparently by 1775, he felt the colonies had attained their majority. In that year he declared himself to be an American in his principles and wished the government would leave the colonists alone either to govern or misgovern themselves as best they could.<sup>19</sup> In another 1775 letter Hume advanced the argument that exclusive rights to the American trade were not worth fighting over because even if America's ports were thrown open to the ships of all nations, Britain would still get a great preponderance of the American trade. Warming up to the subject, Hume continued:

We hear that some of the ministers have proposed in Council that both fleet and army be withdrawn from America and these colonists be left entirely to themselves. I wish I had been a member of His Majesty's Cabinet Council that I might have seconded this opinion. I should have said that this measure only anticipates the necessary course of events a few years.

In this same letter, Hume described vividly the futility of trying to subdue so vast a country, and concluded, "Let us therefore lay aside all anger, shake hands, and part friends. Or, if we retain our anger, let it be only against ourselves for our past folly. . . ." <sup>20</sup> Hume again talked of this futility a few weeks later, and in addition, pictured the anarchy and confusion he foresaw descending upon Britain as the result of the American conflict. Hume adopted a rather patronizing attitude when he wrote to a martial-minded relative early in 1776: the colonies could not be subdued unless they divided, but this was a distinct possibility.<sup>21</sup>

It is obvious from his correspondence that Hume sympathized with the American cause, and it is equally obvious that he was appalled at English conduct. Hume's attitude toward England was complex but significant; it was a product of a psychology which marshalled pride against the contemporary anti-Scottish prejudice.<sup>22</sup> There are numerous instances in Hume's letters where this contempt for the English is expressed. In a letter to Sir Gilbert Elliot, Hume remarked:

I fancy the Ministry will remain; tho surely their late Remissness or Ignorance or Pusillanimity ought to make them ashamed to show their Faces. . . . These

<sup>18</sup>Hume to William Strahan, Mar. 1, 1774, *Hume's Letters*, II, 287–88.

<sup>19</sup>Hume to Baron Mure of Caldwell, Oct. 27, 1775, *Hume's Letters*, II, 302–03.

<sup>20</sup>Hume to William Strahan, Oct. 26, 1775, *Hume's Letters*, II, 300–01; Dalphy I. Fagerstrom, "Scottish Opinion and the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, XI (1954), 259.

<sup>21</sup>Hume to William Strahan, Nov. 13, 1775, *Hume's Letters*, II, 304–05; Hume to John Home, Feb. 8, 1776, *Hume's Letters*, II, 307–08.

<sup>22</sup>John Clive and Bernard Bailyn, "England's Cultural Provinces: Scotland and America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, XI (1954), 212.

are fine doings in America. O! how I long to see America and the East Indies revolted totally & finally, the Revenue reduc'd to half, public Credit fully discredited by Bankruptcy, the third of London in Ruins. . . .<sup>23</sup>

Hume made an identical wish to Strahan in 1769 and in addition said he has had the misfortune to write in "the Language of the most stupid and factious Barbarians in the World. . . ."<sup>24</sup>

In October 1775, Baron Mure of Caldwell wrote Hume asking him to draft a petition to the King from the freeholders of Renfrewshire, Scotland, recommending forcible measures against the colonists. Such petitions were fairly common at this time. Hume's reply stated that he could not draft such a petition, but if the loyal residents of the County of Renfrew felt compelled to intervene in public affairs they should advise the King to clean out the "insolent rascals" in London. Hume said this would be a more worthy ambition for them than attacking people in another hemisphere. After all, Hume quizzed, how could any government expect to maintain its authority at a distance of 3000 miles when it could not even make itself respected at home? A letter written only two months before his death expressed Hume's indignation that the Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, and some other lords along with several prostitutes took off for two weeks and travelled sixty miles from London to enjoy the trouting season. All this occurred, in Hume's words, while the fate of the British Empire was being decided in the New World.<sup>25</sup>

As a Scotsman, David Hume could and did commiserate with the Americans in their struggle. And, as noted, in his political and historical writings Hume had furnished arguments which the Americans, through their knack for judicious editing, could turn into excellent propaganda for their cause. American theorists were not slaves to the thoughts of any man or group of men. They searched the writings of many individuals, particularly British political thinkers, for advantageous ideas. They did spurn a few—Hobbes, Filmer, and the Levellers and Diggers of the seventeenth century; however, they generally refused to let a man's reputation either repel or overawe them completely. Thus they eagerly quoted Blackstone when he paid homage to natural law and disregarded Locke when he remarked on the supremacy of parliament.<sup>26</sup> David Hume fitted into this tradition very well; he was neither ignored completely nor accepted completely in North America.

<sup>23</sup>Hume to Sir Gilbert Elliot, July 22, 1768, *Hume's Letters*, II, 184.

<sup>24</sup>Hume to William Strahan, Oct. 25, 1769, *Hume's Letters*, II, 209.

<sup>25</sup>Hume to Baron Mure, Oct. 27, 1775, *Hume's Letters*, II, 302-03; Hume to William Strahan, May 10, 1776, *Hume's Letters*, II, 319.

<sup>26</sup>Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic: the Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (New York, 1953), 356-57.

The most conspicuous example of attachment was that which existed between Hume and Benjamin Franklin. Apparently they became acquainted during Franklin's visit to London in 1757, and, in 1760, Franklin visited Hume at Edinburgh. This same year Franklin wrote Hume a letter which illustrates the deep regard Franklin had for Hume:

I am not a little pleas'd to hear of your Change of Sentiments in some particulars relating to America; because I think it of Importance to our general Welfare that the People of this Nation should have right Notions of us, and I know of no one that has it more in his Power to rectify their Notions, than Mr. Hume. I have lately read with great Pleasure, as I do every thing of yours, the excellent Essay on the *Jealousy of Commerce*. I think it cannot but have a good Effect in promoting a certain Interest too little thought of by selfish Man, and scarce ever mention'd, so that we hardly have a Name for it; I mean the *Interest of Humanity*, or common Good of Mankind. But I hope particularly from that Essay, an Abatement of the Jealousy that reigns here of the Commerce of the Colonies, at least so far as such Abatement may be reasonable.<sup>27</sup>

In 1762 Franklin sent Hume a monograph describing his lightning rod to be read before the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh. Franklin returned to Great Britain in 1771, and again visited the Scot at his home. The next year Hume wrote Franklin saying that he was glad to hear that the Philadelphian had once again arrived safely in London. This letter of February 7, 1772, was the last of their correspondence (at least the last extant), but in a 1774 letter to Adam Smith, Hume related the shock he felt at Franklin's having been accused before the Privy Council of misusing his position as Deputy Post-Master General of America. Hume seemed to believe that Franklin had gone too far in this instance. If Franklin was aware of a cooling off on the part of his friend, he did not let it influence his regard for Hume as a political theorist. During the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, delegate Franklin suggested that no high officer in any of the three branches of government should receive a salary. This was one of the suggestions Hume had made in his emendation of Harrington's *Oceana*.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup>L. Jesse Lemisch, ed., *Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York, 1961), 154; Franklin to Hume, Sept. 27, 1760, Leonard W. Labaree, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven and London, 1966), IX, 229. Franklin had his titles mixed up here. He was referring to "Of the Jealousy of Trade," contained in the 1758 edition of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, and not "Of Commerce," printed in the 1752 edition of *Political Discourses*. For evidence that respect and admiration between the two men was mutual, see Hume to Franklin, May 10, 1762, *Papers of Franklin*, X, 81-82, in which Hume says that "America has sent us many good things, Gold, Silver, Sugar, Tobacco &c.: But you are the first Philosopher, and indeed the first Great Man of Letters for whom we are beholden to her. . . ."

<sup>28</sup>Franklin to Hume, Jan. 21, 1762, *Papers of Franklin*, X, 17-23, 80-84; R. Klibansky and Ernest C. Mossner, eds., *New Letters of David Hume* (Oxford, 1954),

Other Americans of the Revolutionary generation relied on Hume to help support their position in various controversies. In 1773, Charles Carroll of Carrollton clashed in a newspaper debate with Daniel Dulany, Jr. over the question of whether a colonial governor had the right to set crown officers' fees within a colony or whether this right should be reserved to the colonial assembly. Dulany, one of the governor's councilors and entitled to these fees, sided with the governor. Carroll became the Maryland Assembly's champion. The debate was carried on in the *Maryland Gazette* from February to July, 1773, with both men relying extensively on history to support their arguments. One of Carroll's chief authorities was David Hume's *History of England*, which he cited frequently. It was generally conceded that Carroll carried the field in this clash between the "First Citizen" (Carroll) and "Antilon" (Dulany). Dulany resorted to some personal attacks on Carroll concerning Carroll's Roman Catholic faith and also was bitterly critical of Carroll's use of Hume's *History* as a source. Dulany said this *History* was nothing more than "a studied apology for the Stuarts."<sup>29</sup> It was unfortunate that Dulany had not read Hume with more care, for Dulany's concern with popular limits on sovereignty and his abhorrence of turbulence, disorder, and disobedience to law were views very similar to those of Hume.

Soon after Carroll had called Hume as an expert witness to the correctness of his cause, Josiah Quincy, Jr. made a similar demand. Early in 1774, the "intolerable" Boston Port Bill was under consideration in parliament. The younger Quincy defended the colonial position in his memorable tract, *Observations on . . . the Boston Port Bill*. At one point, Quincy takes up the question of a free militia versus a standing army and cites Hume to strengthen his position:

When the sword is in the hands of a single person—as in our constitution—he will always (says the ingenious Hume) neglect to discipline the militia, in order to have a pretext for keeping up a standing army. 'Tis evident (says the same great character) that this is a mortal distemper of which it must at last inevitably perish.<sup>30</sup>

There would appear to be very little relationship between a radical republican like Thomas Paine and a conservative figure like David Hume; however, an examination of some of the political thought expressed in *Common Sense* indicates that Paine read Hume's political

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194; *Hume's Letters*, II, 286; John M. Burton, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1846), I, 361; Hendel, ed., *Hume's Political Essays*, liiii-liv.

<sup>29</sup>Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience*, 138-42; *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), Feb. 4, 11, 18, Apr. 8, May 6, and July 1, 1773.

<sup>30</sup>Josiah Quincy, Jr., *Observations on the Act of Parliament, commonly called the Boston Port Bill; with Thoughts on Civil Society and Standing Armies* (Boston and London, 1774), 38.

essays very closely. Paine's explanation of the origin of government and the different ways of acquiring monarchies is identical with Hume's as expressed in the essays "Of the Original Contract" and "Of the Origin of Government." Paine had said that government originated and rose because of the inability of moral virtue to govern the world. Hume showed that he believed in a similar rise of government by asserting that human nature was incapable of sustaining original perfection. Paine noted how a man like William the Conqueror ("a French bastard landing with armed banditti") could usurp the throne and how through succeeding generations this usurpation could become sanctified until some of his successors believed they ruled by divine right. Hume had earlier concluded similarly:

When a new government is established, by whatever means, the people are commonly dissatisfied with it, and pay obedience more from fear and necessity, than from any idea of allegiance or of moral obligation. . . . Time, by degrees, removes all these difficulties, and accustoms the nation to regard, as their lawful or native princes, that family, whom, at first, they regarded as usurpers or foreign conquerors.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, Paine's examination of the republican and monarchical elements existing in the English constitution is nothing more than an elaboration of the question raised by Hume in his essay, "Whether the British Government inclines more to absolute monarchy, or to a Republic?"<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, Hume had another sort of influence upon Americans, an influence marked by racial prejudice. In an appended note to his essay "Of National Characters" Hume had written:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures among them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one Negroe as a man of parts and learning;

<sup>31</sup>Nelson F. Adkins, ed., *Thomas Paine: Common Sense and Other Political Writings* (New York, 1953), 15–16; Hume, *Essays*, 8, 10.

<sup>32</sup>Felix Gilbert, "The English Background of American Isolationism in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, I (1944), 156.

but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.<sup>33</sup>

This note is not consistent with Hume's usual respect for the dignity of man. Ernest Mossner observes correctly that Hume doubtless was making an unwarranted generalization based on myths and hearsay.<sup>34</sup>

A dogmatic statement of this nature from a famous man of letters was picked up eagerly by American proslavery writers. In 1773, an anonymous pamphlet was published entitled *Personal Slavery Established*. The author must have had a copy of Hume's essay at his elbow as he wrote, "There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than *white*; nor ever any individual eminent either in action or speculation that was not rather inclining to the *fair*." In the same year, Richard Nisbet published *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture* and like the anonymous author of *Personal Slavery Established*, relied upon Hume for part of his argument in defense of slavery. Perhaps the most fitting conclusion to this unsavory episode was furnished in 1791 when James McHenry of Baltimore wrote the introduction to Benjamin Banneker's first almanac. McHenry said that Banneker's attainments were a "striking contradiction to Mr. *Hume's* doctrine, that the Negroes are naturally inferior to the whites. . . ." <sup>35</sup> Had the philosopher still been alive, he might have hastened to add his "Amen."

Hume's influence was present not only in the writings of Americans; it was felt also in their deliberative bodies. In 1780, the Committee on Finance in the Continental Congress, seeking to make themselves knowledgeable in all matters pertaining to finance, delved thoroughly into Hume's economic essays. And in the Federal Convention of 1787, Alexander Hamilton spoke out against a proposal to attach legal penalties against corruption on the part of office-holders. Hamilton insisted that this was unnecessary by referring to Hume. The *New Yorker* said: "Hume's opinion of the British Constitution confirms the remark, that there is always a body of firm patriots, who often shake a corrupt administration."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Hume, "Of National Characters," *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Essays*, 221–22.

<sup>34</sup>Mossner, ed., in *ibid.*, 222.

<sup>35</sup>Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore, 1969), 304–07, 450.

<sup>36</sup>Edmund Cody Burnett, *The Continental Congress* (New York, 1964 edition), 479; Hendel, ed., *Hume's Political Essays*, lix; Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 4 vols., (New Haven and London, 1966 edition), I, 381. Vernon L. Parrington in *Main Currents in American Thought: The Colonial Mind, 1620–1800* (New York, 1954 edition), I, 301, 303, says that Hume was one of the major influences upon the formation of Hamilton's thought, and that it may well have been



Hamilton called Hume “a writer equally solid and ingenious,” and carried his reliance upon the Scot over into the fight for ratification of the new constitution. Hamilton more or less summarized the arguments advanced in the *Federalist Papers* in his conclusion to “Federalist No. 85,” the last in the series. Hamilton presented his readers with some “judicious reflections” from one of Hume’s essays entitled “Of The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences”:

To balance a large state or society [says he], whether monarchical or republican, on general laws, is a work of so great difficulty that no human genius, however comprehensive, is able, by the mere dint of reason and reflection, to effect it. The judgements of many must unite in the work; experience must guide their labor; time must bring it to perfection, and the feeling of inconveniences must correct the mistakes which they *inevitably* fall into in their first trials and experiments.<sup>37</sup>

Hume perhaps had his most penetrating influence upon America through the person of James Madison. The late Douglass G. Adair has shown in a convincing manner that, at the time of the Constitutional Convention, Madison was a disciple of Hume. In 1913, Charles A. Beard had confidently asserted that Madison’s *Federalist* No. 10 was “a masterly statement of the theory of economic determinism in politics.” Adair challenged this interpretation in his Ph.D. dissertation and in two ingenious essays, “The Tenth Federalist Revisited” and “That Politics May be Reduced To a Science.” According to Adair, the tenth *Federalist* is “eighteenth-century political theory directed toward an eighteenth-century problem. . . .”<sup>38</sup> The problem was whether republicanism could be adopted effectively by an area as large as the United States. Most men, relying on theorists like Montesquieu, felt that it could not be. It was believed that the far-flung sections of a large geographical area could be united and held together only by a great leader who because of the lure of power usually ended up as an absolute monarch. However, in a 1752 essay called the “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” David Hume speculated that it would be possible to set up an extended republic in a large area. It would be much more difficult to establish a republic in a large area

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from the great Scottish skeptic that Hamilton derived his own “cynical psychology.” For numerous specific examples of Hamilton’s indebtedness to Hume, see Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (New York and London, 1961–), I, 94–95, 100; II, 595, 608; III, 77, 705; VI, 53; X, 8, 241–42, 255–57, 267, 280, 313.

<sup>37</sup>C. Hendel, ed., *Hume’s Political Essays*, lix; Syrett, ed., *Papers of Hamilton*, IV, 216, 720–21; Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, with an Introduction by Clinton Rossiter (New York, 1961), 526–27.

<sup>38</sup>Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York, 1965 edition), 15; Douglass G. Adair, “The Tenth Federalist Revisited,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, VIII (1951), 67.



than in a small area, but once established, its very largeness would help protect against and control the disintegrating effects of economic, religious, and political factions—the endemic plague of small republics. Adair demonstrates that Madison was familiar with Hume's essays and that the Virginian realized that here in America all of Hume's theoretical foundations for a stable, large republic were already present. Madison believed that if the opposing economic interests of a large territory could be combined with a federal system of thirteen semi-sovereign states and a system of indirect elections which would help refine pure democracy, it would be possible to establish a stable republic in this country. This, then, was Madison's answer to the problem, an answer which obviated any need for a system of mixed government for the new United States.<sup>39</sup> In short, in *Federalist* No. 10, Madison was restating Humean political theory rather than anticipating Marxian economic doctrine.

Other American notables—men such as Samuel Adams, John Dickinson, Charles Lee, George Washington, John Randolph of Roanoke, Benjamin Rush, and Robert Carter of Nomini Hall—had read Hume's *History* and political writings or at least had them in their libraries. Samuel Adams relied on Hume in part, to help support his polemics; John Randolph, in an 1818 letter, said that he had been “bred in the school of Hobbs and Bayle, and Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke, and Hume and Voltaire and Gibbon [and had] cultivated the skeptical philosophy since boyhood.” Benjamin Rush had met Hume while studying medicine at Edinburgh, and in later life made favorable references to the *History*. John Dickinson called him, “this great man whose political speculations are so much admired.” The erratic Charles Lee, however, was not an admirer. Lee wrote an ironical tract in 1770 directed toward Hume and titled “Epistle.” The “Epistle” subtly held Hume up to ridicule for the way he had supposedly whitewashed the House of Stuart in his *History*.<sup>40</sup> Unhappily, Hume

<sup>39</sup>Douglass G. Adair, “The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: Republicanism, the Class Struggle and the Virtuous Farmer,” Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Yale University, 1943), 220 ff.; Adair, “‘That Politics May Be Reduced To A Science’: David Hume, James Madison, and the Tenth *Federalist*,” *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, XX, (1957), 343–60.

<sup>40</sup>Claude Van Tyne, *The Causes of the War of Independence: being the first volume of a history of the founding of the American Republic* (Boston and New York, 1922), 344; Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience*, 76, 216; Harry A. Cushing, ed., *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4 vols. (New York and London, 1906), II, 189, 325; John Randolph to Dr. John Brockenbrough, Sept. 25, 1818, Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* (Chicago, 1964), 223; John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805–1813* (San Marino, 1966), 12, 67, 169; Parrington, *Main Currents*, I, 228, 242; Edward Robins, “Charles Lee—Stormy Petrel of The Revolution,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XLV (1921), 71–73.

had made other American adversaries, two men much more influential than Charles Lee.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson execrated Hume's work, particularly *The History of England*. Prior to the 1800's, however, there was little in the writings of either man to indicate what was to become deep animosity in later years. Indeed, in 1790, Jefferson admitted in a letter to Thomas Mann Randolph that several of Hume's political essays were good. Jefferson ended on this cryptic note, never mentioning specifically the ones he liked. His library catalogue furnishes only the information that Jefferson did have some of Hume's essays but does not say which ones.<sup>41</sup>

With Adams also, the picture is one of early attraction followed by alienation in later years. In a clash with William Brattle in 1772 over the issue of salaries for Superior Court judges in Massachusetts, Adams buttressed his stand by reference to British historians (Hume among them), as well as the traditional common law authorities. In his *Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States* published in 1787 and 1788, Adams did attack Hume briefly for the supposed unicameralism advocated in "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" but, in another section, Adams revealed that he was not yet estranged completely when he wrote that the legislator must presuppose mankind's natural political badness. This is one of Hume's political maxims.<sup>42</sup> Yet it does seem odd that Adams, a consummate political theorist, should have referred to Hume's writings so seldom.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century it was obvious that the two old revolutionaries, Adams and Jefferson, had no use for the man who had once longed to see America totally in revolt. It is also evident that if it had been possible, they would have expunged all traces of Humean influence. Referring to the *History*, Adams, in an 1816 letter to Jefferson, called Hume a "conceited Scotchman," and said that Americans were too intelligent to be talked out of their freedom, even by such impressive names as Locke or Hume. In another 1816 letter to Jefferson, Adams said that Hume's *History of England* had greatly increased the tories at the expense of the whigs. Adams referred to this *History* as "the bane of Great Britain" adding

<sup>41</sup>Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, May 30, 1790, Albert E. Bergh, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols. (Washington, 1907), VIII, 32. Hereafter cited as *Jefferson's Writings*; E. Millicent Sowerby, ed., *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, 1952).

<sup>42</sup>L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel, eds., *Legal Papers of John Adams*, 4 vols. in *The Adams Papers* series, Lyman H. Butterfield, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), I, lxxxix; Correa M. Walsh, *The Political Science of John Adams: A Study in the Theory of Mixed Government and the Bicameral System* (New York and London, 1915), 16 and n., 40n.

that it had completely forced out all the honest histories written by men like Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, Gilbert Burnet, and John Oldmixon. These men were representative of the whig writers Hume criticized severely in his conclusion to the reigns of the Stuarts. Hume called their compositions worthless both as to style and content.<sup>43</sup>

Imbued as he was with whig political principles, Thomas Jefferson could not let such derogatory remarks go unchallenged. Among Hume's American critics, Jefferson was most sustained in his denunciation. Jefferson said that Hume's *History* had done more to undermine the principles of the English Constitution than the largest standing army ever could hope to have achieved. And in another letter:

What the patriots of the last age dreaded & deprecated from a standing army, and what could not have been achieved for the crown by any standing army, but with torrents of blood, one man, by the magic of his pen, has effected covertly, insensibly, peaceably; and has made voluntary converts of the best men of the present age to the parricide opinions of the worst of the last. . . .<sup>44</sup>

Responding to a letter from Major John Cartwright in 1824, Jefferson called Hume the "great apostle of Toryism," a "degenerate son of science," and a "traitor to his fellow men." In a letter to William Duane in 1810, Jefferson admitted that he had been an enthusiastic reader of Hume's *History* when a young man and then had to spend a great deal of time in research and reflection to "eradicate the tory poison" which it had instilled into his mind.<sup>45</sup>

In other letters Jefferson did admit that Hume had an elegant style even if it was biased. As an antidote to Hume, Jefferson constantly recommended a history written by another Briton, John Baxter, Baxter's *History*, according to Jefferson, was really just Hume's *History* with the offensive parts deleted. The last entry in Jefferson's *Commonplace Book* was a satire upon some of Hume's writings. Jefferson first

<sup>43</sup>John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Dec. 25, 1816, Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1851), IV, 466–67, X, 82; Adams to Jefferson, Dec. 16, 1816, *Jefferson's Writings*, XV, 91–92; Hume, *History of England*, (1885 edition), VI, 320. It is interesting to note that Locke as well as Hume, had fallen from Adams' favor with the passage of years. In his *Thoughts on Government*, published in 1776, Adams had praised Locke highly.

<sup>44</sup>Jefferson to John Adams, Nov. 25, 1816, *Jefferson's Writings*, XV, 81; Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1959), 498; Jefferson to Matthew Carey, Nov. 22, 1818, Sowerby, ed. *Catalogue of Jefferson*, I, 176–77, 178–79.

<sup>45</sup>Jefferson to John Cartwright, June 5, 1824, Philip S. Foner, *Basic Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1944), 788; Jefferson to William Duane, Aug. 12, 1810, *Jefferson's Writings*, XII, 406–07; Adrienne Koch, *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Gloucester, 1957), 126.

quoted Hume on some terrible punishments handed out formerly by English courts. Hume stated that considering the general character of the age, these punishments were not that inhuman. Jefferson next used a statement of Hume's out of context and asked if all men will not eventually come to agree with Hume that an absolute monarchy is not such a terrible thing.<sup>46</sup>

It is ironic that Hume, who had expressed approval of the American experiment and who had sided emotionally with them in their struggle, should have suffered so much abuse for his *History of England* from some Americans such as the younger Dulany, Jefferson, and John Adams. Considering the harsh nature of their criticism of this work, it is questionable whether any of Hume's writings exerted substantial influence upon these men. To be sure, not all Americans detested Hume and for these men the Scot's political and historical works were available in both private and public libraries.<sup>47</sup> Charles Carroll, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Josiah Quincy, Jr., and Thomas Paine, among others, were inspired by Hume and borrowed from his thoughts on politics, economics, and history.

Even the Americans who read only Hume's *History* were exposed to the philosophical and political thought it contained, and the majority of the American leadership had read at least this much. Because of this familiarity, and because he was referred to frequently, it can be maintained with a degree of assurance that David Hume's writings were of importance in the intellectual formation of the United States.

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<sup>46</sup> Jefferson to H. G. Spafford, Mar. 17, 1814, Samuel E. Forman, ed., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Indianapolis, 1900); Jefferson to John Norvall, June 14, 1807, Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 10 vols. (New York and London, 1898), 72; Jefferson to George Washington Lewis, Oct. 25, 1825, *Jefferson's Writings*, XVI, 124–28; Gilbert Chinard, *The Commonplace Book of Thomas Jefferson: A Repertory of His Ideas on Government* (Baltimore and Paris, 1926), 374–76.

<sup>47</sup> Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience*, Appendix II.