WHEN DID HUME PLAN A HISTORY?

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The intellectual life of David Hume is one which has been primarily reconstructed from his little autobiographical essay, "My Own Life." For the most part the essay is reliable as a guide. However, when other autobiographical remarks are linked to the essay, they are not always immediately compatible. I think I have found such an instance, which has significance, for understanding Hume's thought when it is viewed alongside other writings and passages. In this brief paper, I wish to show that there is other autobiographical information which helps establish Hume's historical interest in writing a history earlier than the account in "My Own Life" (published in 1777), he says:

> In 1752, the Faculty of Advocates chose me their librarian, an office from which I received little or no emolument, but which gave me the command of a large library. I then formed the plan of writing the *History of England*; but being frightened with the notion of continuing a narrative through a period of 1700 years, I commenced with the recession of the House of Stuart, an epoch when, I thought, the misrepresentations of faction began chiefly to take place.[1]

This passage tends to leave us with the idea that this is the time and the place at which Hume became interested in history. The reasons for this change are that he had the command of a large library, and that all of his earlier writings had come "unnoticed and unobserved into the world,"[2] so he decided to try his hand at something else. Even the language of the passage suggests this; he says, "I *then* formed the plan of writing the *History of England*." (Hume's use of "then" is clearly one which exhibits a temporal connection.)

In fact, the above passage has probably led to recent accounts like that of Professor Trevor-Roper, who writes:

> Yet Hume, unlike Gibbon, became a historian almost by accident. In 1752, after a great electoral battle which he has described in one of his most entertaining letters, he was elected Librarian of the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, and there, sitting among those 30,000 volumes, he suddenly saw his opportunity. "You know," he wrote to a friend, "that there is no post of honour in the English Parnassus more vacant than that of History. Style, judgement, impartiality—everything is wanting to our historians"; and so he decided to fill the vacant throne. He would write the history of England. No sooner had he decided then he set to work.[3]

Now, conjoining these two statements of the same event, we see a definite view emerge. Hume abruptly decided to write the history of England. It was "almost by accident" because he did not think of it until he was sitting in the Library. Was it not until this time—1752—that Hume became interested in writing a history? And before this time was he interested solely in philosophy? From reading "My Own Life" and historical references to it, it is easy to form such an impression.

Such a view, however, interferes with developing an adequate account of his varied interests, and it could be read as suggesting that Hume had no interest in the history of England prior to that time (1752). However, there is ample evidence to the contrary. For instance, Professor Mossner has a more plausible view of Hume's historical interest:

> Hume's interest in composing a national history dates back at least to the period of the *Treatise*. In 1745 he had made a first attempt at composition but had stopped short for lack of time and lack of books. In 1749, soon after his return from Turin, he plunged more actively into historical studies. Three extant memoranda of that year, comprising some 150 pages, cover the entire course of British history from the beginning to 1739.[4]

Hume himself gives *another* answer to my question; one which I think fits in with Mossner's account, but would date Hume's historical interest five years earlier (1740) than what Mossner gives and, at the same time, confirms his first statement about Hume—that it dates back to the period of the *Treatise*. In the *Treatise* where he discusses the objects of allegiance, he makes the following qualifying remarks:

> *It does not belong to my present purpose to shew* [my italics], that these general principles [political obligation and authority] are applicable to the late *revolution*; and that all the rights and privileges, which ought to be sacred to a free nation, were at that time threaten'd with the utmost danger. *I am better pleas'd to leave this controverted subject, if it really admits of controversy* [my italics]; and to indulge myself in some philosophical reflections, which naturally arise from that important event.[5]

I labeled this passage as beginning with *qualifying* remarks, for why would he have used such a long introductory clause *twice* unless he had something else in mind besides the "philosophical reflections" he followed with in the *Treatise*. Here Hume, it seems to me, suggests that he had intentions to do a "philosophical history" (i.e., history written in accordance with the principles of human nature) at the time of writing Book III of the *Treatise* (1740). The above passage is also not to be treated lightly because it is, after all, set off as an independent, introductory *paragraph*—not just some stylistic device. (It is clearly more suggestive than that.)

Moreover Hume frequently refers to historical subjects as "controverted"; see the *History* and the first *Inquiry*, besides the *Treatise*. A little bit earlier in the *Treatise* he invites the reader to compare the English revolution with what he had to say about the history of several nations of the world.[6] Hence, Hume had his mind on history throughout this section—indeed even this whole part of the *Treatise*—so it is not surprising to find a passage such as this one, which I claim offers further inductive evidence for Hume's early historical interests. Hume adds: "But tho' this general principle [i.e., in the case of enormous tyranny and oppression, 'tis lawful to take arms even against supreme power] be authoriz'd by common sense, and the practice of all ages, 'tis certainly impossible for the laws, or even for philosophy, to establish any *particular* rules, by which we may know when resistance is lawful; and decide all controversies, which may arise on that subject."[7] What particular rules are observed or have been observed at a given specific time is the historian's business. The general principles Hume had already established in the *Treatise*. But it seems likely that he had his eye on this project all along, as Professor Mossner suggests. History, for Hume, was a species of "moral reasoning," i.e., a causal chain of particular and general facts, which "confirms true philosophy." Eventually, he thought, his *Treatise* would be validated by history.

In addition to the immediate context of the passage backing my suggestion for the interpretation of the text, I think the whole enterprise of the *Treatise* fits the portrait sketched here. For his primary purpose was to add to our "knowledge of man" by developing a "science of man," and that science would be an experimental one. But this sort of knowledge is not possible "otherwise than from careful and exact experiments, and the observation of those particular effects, which result from its different circumstances and situations" (Introduction). This remark strongly suggests that students of men and women must know something about the reactions of men and women in different historical settings.

What my reading of Hume does here is hopefully (*a*) to correct a view which separates his historical and philosophical interests—making the former look rather incidental to the latter, and (*b*) to show the compatibility between these interests. The historical, biographical conclusion that we want to see become as common-place as Hugh Trevor-Roper's view has, is that *the historical was pictured by Hume as an integral part of his method from the beginning.*[8] It is difficult to pick continuities out of one's immediate past; it is, rather, much easier to see events as abrupt changes or discontinuities. The latter is stressed by Hume in "My Own Life" and also by Professor Trevor-Roper. This view point makes us overlook, though, and interest Hume had from the beginning, an interest which must be recognized in order to explain his historically and temporally oriented methodology and to help us appreciate an important continuity in his thought.[9]

NOTES

1. David Hume, "My Own Life," in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Charles W. Hendel, ed. (Indianapolis, 1955), p. 7.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

3. H. R. Trevor-Roper, "Hume as a Historian," in *David Hume: A Symposium*, D. F. Pears, ed. (London, 1963), pp. 89-90; the same essay appeared in *The Listener*, vol. LXV (28 December 1961), pp. 1103-1104, 1119.

4. Ernest E. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Austin and Edinburg, 1954), p. 301.

5. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby–Bigge, ed. (Oxford, 1888), Book III, Part II, Sect. X; pp. 564-65. The same paragraph is "modernized," i.e., its English up-dated, in A. D. Lindsay's edition of the *Treatise* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1911), II, p. 263.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 562: "Whoever considers the history of the several nations of the world; their revolutions, conquests, increase, and dimunution; the manner in which their particular governments are establish'd, and the successive right transmitted from one person to another, will soon learn to treat very lightly all disputes concerning the rights of princes, and will be convinc'd, that a strict adherence to any general rules, and the rigid loyalty to particular persons and families, on which some people set so high a value, are virtues that hold less of reason, than of bigotry, the study of history confirms the reasonings of true philosophy; which, shewing us the original qualities of human nature, teaches us to regard the controversies in politics as incapable of any decision in most cases, and as entirely subordinate to the interests of peace and liberty." This description pretty well sums up the volumes on the Tudors and Stuarts; at least, their general viewpoint.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 563. Here again, we find the connection made by Hume between controversy and historical subjects.

8. Actually, Hume's historical interest goes back prior to the *Treatise*, and is seen in his juvenile essay on chivalry and honor; see Ernest C. Mossner, "David Hume's 'An Historical Essay on Chivalry and Modern Honour'," *Modern Philology*, vol. 45, no. 1 (January 1947), pp. 54-60.

9. For a discussion of Hume's historical methodology and its relationship between the philosophical writings and the *History*, see my "Hume, History, and Human Nature." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 36, no. 3 (July-Sept. 1975), pp. 481-96. One of the better recent studies which is beginning to piece together a more adequate view of Hume's project—reflecting his historical interest—is Duncan Forbes' book, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975), see esp. pp. xiiff., and Parts I and III.

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