CHAPTER EIGHT

“THE PATRON OF INFIDELITY”: READING HUME AND THE COMMON SENSE PHILOSOPHERS

On 17 March 1846, the judge, legal reformer and man of letters, Henry Cockburn, wrote to John Hill Burton applauding his biography of the most controversial figure of the Scottish Enlightenment. “I have just finished David – and cannot resist the pleasure of telling you how much I have been instructed and delighted”.1 Burton had recently published the Life and Correspondence of David Hume (1846), the first biographical work to draw on Hume’s unpublished letters and manuscripts. Although Burton’s work lies outwith the scope of the current book, Cockburn’s response reveals a great deal about how Hume and his works were received in Scotland in the half century after his death:

The Collection of his letters, now, for the first time, put into order, would, of itself, make an invaluable book. But you have connected and explained them by most judicious observations; and have walked over the burning ploughshares which fanaticism and faction will for ever set in the way of any biographer of Hume, with great felicity.2

Hume is a brooding presence throughout the current book, as he remains in Scottish Enlightenment scholarship more generally. His History of England was undoubtedly the most widely read historical book in Scotland in the second half of the eighteenth century, appearing in personal library collections more often than any other title and performing consistently well at every lending library for which borrowing records survive.3 Meanwhile, the Essays and Treatises were amongst the most readily available philosophical books in the country, offering readers a digest of his most significant writing on moral philosophy, literature, politics and religion – so that in spite of the notoriously poor reception of the Treatise of Human Nature, most Scottish readers who were willing to do so could cast judgement on his controversial views for themselves.

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1 Cockburn's Letters, 195.
2 Ibid., 195.
3 See above, Chapters Two and Four.
As Cockburn suggests, however, Hume's relationship with his readers was by no means an uncomplicated affair. His History of England was widely read precisely because it provided the most readable account of England's constitutional development yet written, as we have already suggested, but the subject matter inevitably exposed Hume to politically-motivated criticisms. As Hume famously testified in his autobiographical sketch “My Own Life”, he was “assailed by one cry of reproach, disapprobation, and even detestation [from all factions] English, Scotch, and Irish, Whig and Tory”. More problematically still, Hume's well-known scepticism and questionable religious views were a source of genuine concern to contemporary readers, meaning that he was often expelled to the margins of readers' experiences – a force for evil and corruption in the world, the butt of readers' jokes, a figure of nonsense and ridicule, the ‘other’ against whom their version of Enlightenment was defined. Cockburn did not write idly, then, when he warned Burton that “those who cannot be religious without being intolerant will never forgive you for being fair”. This chapter examines responses to Hume amongst an earlier generation of readers, asking whether Cockburn was right to imply their intolerance of Hume's perceived political partiality and religious deviance impeded the impact of Enlightenment in provincial Scotland.

I

Most modern commentators now agree that Hume's History was a systematic attempt to deconstruct the great myths of British political history such as Magna Carta, the rise of Parliament and the Glorious Revolution. In line with his empirical science of man, Hume wished to release party politics in Britain from its rhetorical attachment to these myths. Most importantly, he revealed the extent to which accident and misadventure were the normal agencies of historical change, not the alleged divine assistance and far-sighted wisdom that had for so long been read into the epoch-making constitutional transformation of 1688–9. Put simply, experience and observation decreed that consensus

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4 Hume, History, 1: xxx.
5 Cockburn's Letters, 195.
6 The classic view is D. Forbes, Hume's Philosophical Politics (Cambridge, 1975); this has been revised in different ways by Phillipson, Hume; Pocock, Barbarism and Religion II; and V. G. Wexler, David Hume and the History of England (Philadelphia, 1979).