



## **An Early Account of David Hume**

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AN EARLY ACCOUNT OF DAVID HUME

In New Letters of David Hume, Professor Klibansky and Mossner lamented the "dearth of information on Hume's early development".<sup>1</sup> Though some new facts and documents have emerged since 1954, the early period of Hume's life, to 1740, remains the most obscure. The account of Hume in 1740 presented below adds nothing to our knowledge of the evolution of Hume's philosophy, but it does give us an interesting picture of the young philosopher in society, and it suggests that those traits of character which later earned him the title of "le bon David" were already in evidence. The sketch below stresses, as many of his friends and adversaries were later to do, the divergence between the detached scepticism of his writings and his amiable engagement in the social life of a company. And if we take seriously the report that Hume was left in charge of the domestic "oeconomy" in the family he was visiting at Richmond, we might see this as foreshadowing his solicitude over, and constant interest in, the management of his own household and financial affairs in later years.

The account printed here is an extract from a letter by William Mure of Caldwell to his sister Agnes, dated "Richmond June 5th 1740".<sup>2</sup> Mure has long been recognized as one of Hume's most intimate friends: Hume himself summed up the relationship when he wrote, on Mure's death in 1776, "The Baron was among the oldest and best Friends I had in the World."<sup>3</sup> The document published here constitutes the earliest concrete evidence of their friendship yet recovered, ante-dating Hume's first published letter to Mure by more than two years.<sup>4</sup> It appears that the two men were spending the summer of 1740 in or near London, and possibly both staying at the house of some mutual friend.<sup>5</sup> Mure had at this time just finished his study of law at Edinburgh University, and would probably have been vacationing in

London en route to Leyden, where he was to complete his legal training.<sup>6</sup> Hume may have been in the capital preparing to see Book III of his A Treatise of Human Nature, "Of Morals", through the press: it was published in November 1740. This, and the first two books of the Treatise, which had been published in 1739, were presumably the writings which he discussed with the company at Richmond:

*We have been here now these ten days, and pass our time in a very agreeable way, we have our countrey man Mr. Hume the author of the Metaphysical books that you heard so much of last summer<sup>7</sup> as a party in our retirement, he is a very sensible young fellow and extreamly curious in most parts of learning and how much soever he has shown himself a Sceptick upon subjects of speculation and enquiry, he is as far from it as any man with regard to the qualities of a well natured friendly disposition, and an honest heart which are no doubt of greater consequence to the intrinsick worth of a character than any abstract opinions whatever. As he is very communicative of all his knowledge we have a great deal from him in the way of dispute and argument, and not a little too in the way of plain information we reason upon every point with the greatest freedom, even his own books, (which we are working at at present) we canvass with ease, and attack him boldly wherever we can get the least hold of him, and question or contradict his most favourite notions; all this goes on with the greatest good humour, and affords us entertainment both within doors, and in the feilds at our walks in this delightful country, which is the finest that one can possibly imagine, and has the preference by people that has travel'd throw most of Europe, to any they ever saw. We make use of our Philosopher too in another way less becoming the dignity of his Character, as we*

*keep family within ourselves, he provides the necessaries of household Oeconomy and manages all the affairs of house keeping. From these few hints you may imagine we spend our time here in a pleasant enough manner, much more to all our satisfaction than in the continued noise and hurry of the town*

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1. R. Klibansky and E. C. Mossner, eds., New Letters of David Hume (Oxford, 1954), p. 227.
2. The manuscript is among the Boyle of Shewalton papers in the Scottish Record Office, H. M. General Register House, Edinburgh (GD 1/481/1). I am grateful to the Keeper of Records, Scotland, for his kind permission to reproduce the extract here. Although the letter is unsigned, comparison with other letters in the same collection signed by Mure reveals that the hand is his. I have retained Mure's spelling and punctuation throughout, except in a few cases where a word required completion or alteration for the sake of the sense.
3. J.Y.T. Greig, ed., The Letters of David Hume (Oxford, 1932), II, 312.
4. Greig, op.cit., I, 43-45.
5. I have been unable to identify this mutual friend.
6. Selections from the Family Papers Preserved at Caldwell 3 vols., (Glasgow, 1854), I, 29, and II, 12-17. As a Memorandum there printed shows, Mure was in Leyden by October, 1740.
7. Books I and II of Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature, published in 1739.