



More Evidence that Hume Wrote the *Abstract*

David Fate Norton

Hume Studies Volume XIX, Number 1 (April, 1993) 217-222.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use. Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

More Evidence that Hume Wrote the *Abstract*

David Fate Norton

In the preceding paper, David Raynor has offered several reasons for discounting J. O. Nelson's unfounded claim that Adam Smith was the author of *An Abstract of ... "A Treatise of Human Nature."* Prior to the discovery of a copy of this work, it may have been plausible to suppose that the *Abstract* was written by someone other than Hume, but the internal evidence of the pamphlet is so strongly in favour of Humean authorship that not even Nelson can bring himself to question this evidence—although he now chooses to ignore it. Given that Nelson's argument rests on the far from compelling assumption that in 1740 there were two and only two Mr. Smith's of whom Hume had knowledge and who may have had an interest in writing or publishing philosophy, it is especially useful to have William Smith, publisher of the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, brought again to our attention, and especially since it is obvious that a copy of the *Abstract* had been sent to that journal prior to the publication of the review of the *Treatise* published there in the spring of 1740.¹ In short, Raynor nicely shows why Keynes and Sraffa were wrong to suppose that Hume, Hutcheson and John Noon were all involved in a conspiracy to undercut Noon's interest by publishing an Irish edition of the *Treatise*,² and why Nelson is wrong to suppose that if the "Mr Smith" of Hume's letter is not John Smith of Dublin, then he can only be Adam Smith, and that the latter must have written the *Abstract*.

I wish to consider further evidence, some of it circumstantial, relevant to this discussion. This evidence adds probability, I submit, to the conclusion that Hume wrote the *Abstract*.

1. In the autumn of 1737 Hume told Henry Home that he could not give him a "general Notion of the Plan" or "Abridgement" of what was to be the *Treatise*. A careless reading of the *Abstract* might lead one to suppose that this is evidence that Hume did not write this short work. But in fact the *Abstract* is not an abridgement. It is an effort to make clearer, by carefully tracing "one simple argument ... from the beginning to the end," a work that had been "complained of as obscure and difficult."³ The available evidence confirms one in the belief that Hume could not abridge the *Treatise*, but on several occasions he did recast parts of it in more accessible form. The first such recasting was the *Abstract*. That this brief work is not merely an abridgement makes

it less likely, I suggest, that it was written by anyone other than Hume himself.⁴

2. The *Abstract*, although said to be “Printed for C. [C]orbett,⁵ at Addison’s Head, over-against St. Dunstan’s Church, in Fleet-street,” was in fact printed by William Strahan, for none other than John Noon, the publisher of the *Treatise*.⁶ This we know from Strahan’s ledgers. These are preserved in the British Library.⁷ Moreover, on April 19 and 20, 1739, Corbett placed the following advertisement in the *London Daily Post and General Advertiser*:

Gentlemen,

As I have very lately undertaken the Business of a Publisher, so will I as faithfully execute it, if at any time you please to employ,

Your most Obedient, Humble Servant,
Charles Corbett,

Who will Inviolably keep secret all Names of Authors, Proprietors, &c. whatever.

The fact that Corbett indicates his willingness to undertake clandestine, vanity publishing gives all the explanation one needs of his willingness to become front man for a puff produced by Hume, and financed, as the *Abstract* was, by Hume’s publisher.⁸ The fact that it was Noon who arranged for the London printing of the *Abstract* in no way proves that this work was written by Hume, but it is another bit of evidence supportive of that conclusion, for it indicates that Noon was in on the effort to publicize the poorly selling volumes of the *Treatise* that he had published.⁹

3. Robert Cannon found a copy of volume three of the *Treatise* containing extensive manuscript amendments in Hume’s hand. As he has also reported, a copy of the *Abstract* is bound together with this copy of volume three, and this copy of the *Abstract* is also *amended* by Hume. These amendments appear to be those of an author, not those of a mere corrector, nor do they appear to be the additions of someone criticizing another author’s production. In short, Hume’s presence here also appears to be authorial.¹⁰

4. Some of Hume’s contemporaries knew or assumed that he had written the *Abstract*. An extant copy of the first edition of the work, a copy bearing the inscription, “Cowbridge Society 1740,” bears in what I judge to be an eighteenth-century hand a further and later inscription, “This tract was published by D. Hume to draw the attention of the public to his first work which fell dead born from the press.” This copy is in the collection of the Library of the Union Theological Seminary.¹¹

MORE EVIDENCE THAT HUME WROTE THE ABSTRACT

In addition, an anonymous reviewer of the *Treatise*, writing in the spring of 1740 for the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, clearly assumes that the author of the *Treatise* is also the author of the *Abstract*.¹² A year earlier, in this same journal, Hume was identified as the author of the *Treatise*. As is well known, the *Treatise* was published anonymously, but Hume had revealed his secret to his family and a few close friends, and also to Pierre Desmaizeaux.¹³ Given that Desmaizeaux was a regular contributor to the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, it is not surprising that the editors of this journal knew that Hume had written the *Treatise*. But if the editors knew that, and if they further assumed that the author of the *Treatise* was also the author of the *Abstract*, then they obviously supposed that Hume was the author of the *Abstract*.

The most important evidence that Hume wrote the *Abstract* is, in my view, that emphasized by Keynes and Sraffa: the internal evidence of the work itself. This evidence is well but not exhaustively reviewed by Keynes and Sraffa in the introduction to their edition of the *Abstract*. To add only briefly to the points they make, it is clear that the author of the *Abstract* not only knew the *Treatise* extremely well, but had the confidence to state on his title-page that he had “farther illustrated and explained” the “Chief Argument” of that work, and he did indeed provide illustrations and explanations that are not to be found in the “larger work” he hopes to make more intelligible in this way. Moreover, in the Preface of the work the author unmistakably echoes a position that Hume himself takes in his letters of the time, namely, that “the Author [of the *Treatise*] seems to insinuate, that were his philosophy receiv’d, we must alter from the foundation the greatest part of the sciences” (T 643), that this author must wait with patience to see his work considered, and that his work must be judged by “the FEW, whose verdict is more apt to be corrupted by partiality” (T 644) to existing systems.¹⁴ And in the text of the *Abstract* itself this author introduced “Adam, created in the full vigour of understanding, without experience” (T 650), and other examples and phrases (some of which were noted by Keynes and Sraffa) that, although not found in the *Treatise*, reappear in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the recasting of book one of the *Treatise* that Hume first published in 1748. The case for Hume’s authorship of the *Abstract* seems to me as strong as such cases can be, but as Nelson may have raised doubts in the minds of some, perhaps a comprehensive report of this internal evidence should be prepared.

McGill University

1. John O. Nelson, "The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited," *Hume Studies* 17, no. 1 (April 1991): 83-86. The inadequacy of Nelson's argument is noted by J. Broome, "On the Authorship of the *Abstract*: A Reply to John O. Nelson," *Hume Studies* 18, no. 1 (April 1992): 95-103. But Broome also dismisses as implausible the possibility that there may have been a third Mr. Smith who figured significantly in the lives of Hume or Hutcheson. That the Mr. Smith in question is almost certainly William Smith, publisher of the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, was first brought to my attention by Professor James Moore. On Hume and the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, see David R. Raynor, "The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited," *Hume Studies* 19, no. 1 (April 1993): 213-15.
2. I suppose Noon would also have been in on the plot Keynes and Sraffa outline for, according to Hume, "My Bookseller [that is, John Noon] has sent to Mr Smith a Copy of my Book" (letter of 4 March, 1740, to Francis Hutcheson, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. [Oxford, 1932], 1:39). This is a point made much of by Nelson in his first article on this topic. See J. O. Nelson, "Has the Authorship of *An Abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature* Really Been Decided," *Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1976): 82-91, esp. 84. R. W. Connon and M. Pollard suggest that Noon might well have been asked to send a copy of the *Treatise* to an Irish bookseller simply in order to find a Dublin outlet for the work. This now appears to be a plausible but unnecessary conjecture. See "On the Authorship of 'Hume's' *Abstract*," *Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1977): 60-66, esp. 61.
3. This point has been previously made, I find, by Norman Kemp Smith. See his review of the Keynes-Sraffa edition of the *Abstract*, in *Mind* 47 (1938): 521. It is here relevant to note that W. R. Scott's contribution to the myth of Adam Smith's authorship, the claim that, "From [Alexander] Carlyle's *Autobiography* we learn that it was customary for Hutcheson and Leechman to require promising members of their classes to prepare abstracts either of new or standard works," is itself a myth. Carlyle tells us of a literary society for which he had written a paper on Hutcheson's *Essay on the Passions and Affections*, and he speaks of a "discourse" that he, Carlyle, gave at Divinity Hall. Both of these works by Carlyle were eventually shown to Hutcheson. But the text to which Scott refers (*Autobiography* [Edinburgh, 1860], 101) says nothing whatsoever about the customary teaching practices of Leechman and Hutcheson. It is no wonder, then, that Scott abandoned the Adam Smith hypothesis so readily. See his *Adam Smith as Student and Professor* (Glasgow, 1937), 34-35.

MORE EVIDENCE THAT HUME WROTE THE ABSTRACT

4. For a contemporary and lengthy summary of volumes one and two of the *Treatise*, see the *Nouvelle Bibliothèque, ou histoire littéraire des principaux écrits que se publient* 4 (July 1740): 291-316; (September 1740): 45-63.
5. The imprint of the *Abstract* reads "C. Borbet," a misprint for "C. Corbett."
6. This fact was first mentioned in this context by Connon and Pollard (above, n. 2), 66. Broome (above, n. 1) overlooks this fact, arguing that Noon had nothing to do with the publication of the *Abstract* (p. 100).
7. Add. Ms 48800, fol. 16. Strahan's charge to Noon, dated 9 February, 1740, is for £1.8.0. Information on this transaction is included in W. B. Todd, "David Hume, A Preliminary Bibliography," in *Hume and the Enlightenment*, ed. W. B. Todd (Edinburgh, 1974), 191.
8. It is possible, I suppose, that Hume himself contributed to the costs of printing the *Abstract*, but I know of no evidence indicating that he did so. Strahan's records indicate that 500 copies of the *Abstract* were published. Consequently, I think there would be very little reason for John Smith of Dublin to consider making another edition of the work, as Broome suggests. If he could (as he apparently did; see Broome [above, n. 1], 97 n. 7) import into Ireland copies of the two-volume, 800-page *Treatise*, he could surely import copies of the 32-page *Abstract*. And a stock of 500 of the latter would likely have been adequate to supply the entire market.
9. It would be useful to have the evidence for Broome's claim that several hundred copies of the *Treatise* remained unsold at the time of Hume's death in 1776. While there is evidence that some two or three hundred copies of the *Treatise* were (as we might say) *remaindered* about 1760, at the time of Hume's death the *Treatise* was apparently scarce. The author of a "Character" of Hume, published in the year following his death, said that the *Treatise* "is now very scarce," and for that reason offered "some account of it." See *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1776* (London, 1777), 28.
10. Robert W. Connon, "Some Hume MS Alterations on a Copy of the *Abstract*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976): 353-56. I do not, as does Broome, find the presence of these amendments, which indeed appear to me to be in Hume's hand, to be incontrovertible evidence that Hume wrote the *Abstract*. Broome (above, n. 1) supposes that Hume would have no reason to "correct stylistically a pamphlet" he had not written (p. 102). But I have seen photocopies of just such amendments, in Hume's hand, widely

dispersed in the margins of a copy of the *Edinburgh Review*—in, that is, the margins of articles that Hume cannot credibly be supposed to have written.

I know of no evidence, by the way, suggesting that Hume had kept his corrected copy of the *Abstract* (and the copy of volume three of the *Treatise* with which it is bound) until his death (Broome [above, n. 1], 102). On the other hand, there is evidence that Hume kept possession of his heavily corrected (but now lost) copies of volumes one and two of the *Treatise*. See my “Baron Hume’s Bequest: The Hume Manuscripts and their First Use,” *Year Book of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* (1987): 26-42, esp. 27.

11. I wish to thank Mr. John Cox of the UTS Library for providing me with a photocopy of the title page of this copy. The phrase “fell dead born from the press” occurs in Hume’s *My Own Life*, which was first published in 1778, and thus we can conclude that this second inscription was written after that date. I have no further information about the Cowbridge Society.
12. Remember that this review makes considerable use of the *Abstract*, probably of the very manuscript copy thereof that Hume mentions to Hutcheson in the letter of 4 March, 1740. See David Raynor’s paper above.
13. That Desmaizeaux was the source of this information, and possibly the author of the first notice in the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, is suggested by E. C. Mossner, “The Continental Reception of Hume’s *Treatise*, 1739-1741,” *Mind* 56 (1947): 31-43; see p. 35. The notice in question begins, “A gentleman, a Mr. Hume, has published A *Treatise of human Nature: being an Attempt, &c.*” See *Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des savans de L’Europe*, 22 (April- June, 1739): 481-82.
14. Compare, for example, Hume’s letter of 13 February, 1739, to Henry Home: “I thought it wou’d contribute very much to my Tranquillity ... to be in the Countrey, while the Success of the Work was doubtful. I am afraid twill remain so very long. Those, who are accustom’d to reflect on such abstract Subjects are commonly full of Prejudices. ... My Principles are also so remote from all the vulgar Sentiments on this Subject, that were they to take place, they wou’d produce almost a total Alteration in Philosophy. ... I am young enough to see what will come of the Matter” (*New Letters of David Hume*, ed. E. C. Mossner and R. Klibansky [Oxford, 1954; reprint, New York, 1983], 5-6). See also Hume’s letters of early 1734 (to an unnamed physician) and of 6 April, 1739 (to Pierre Desmaizeaux), *The Letters of David Hume*, 1:12-18, esp. 16, and 29-30.