



Mark Salber Phillips. *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820*

Mark G. Spencer

Hume Studies Volume XXVII, Number 1 (April, 2001) 186-191.

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/>

MARK SALBER PHILLIPS. *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. Pp. xvii + 369. ISBN 0-691-03179-7, cloth, \$57.50; ISBN 0-691-00867-1, paper, \$25.95.

This gracefully written and ably-researched book explores historical writing in Britain in the last half of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth centuries. Readers of this journal, however, may be most interested to know that it is also a book in which Hume figures prominently. One of Phillip's most involved subtexts aims to explain how it was that Hume, the celebrated historian of the eighteenth century, fell from grace in the nineteenth century.

As any scholar interested in historiography will know, this is not Phillips's first foray into the history of history writing. In the background of the present endeavor are his earlier published works on the writing of history in the Italian Renaissance—see, for instance, his well-received *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977)—and a number of more recent essays on eighteenth-century topics, some of which, in revised forms, find their way into the book under review. Phillips brings a well-trained mind to his study of history writing in eighteenth-century Britain; and it shows.

A central idea in this book is that, if we are successfully to recapture the essence of eighteenth-century historical writing, we must think about history in an expansive way. This means defining the "genres" of history broadly enough to include not only general, philosophical, and conjectural histories, but also annals, memoirs, biography, and literary history. It also means shifting our "attention away from the customary focus on a few great, individual works" (xi). Phillips's wide-ranging approach takes in many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers. His twelve chapters provide valuable discussions of thinkers as disparate as John Aikin, William Alexander, Archibald Alison, Samuel Ancell, Adam Anderson, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, John Bennett, Joseph Berington, Robert Bisset, Thomas Blackwell, James Boswell, Edmund Burke, William Creech, Isaac D'Israeli, Adam Ferguson, William Gilpin, William Godwin, Elizabeth Hamilton, Robert Henry, Julius Hutchinson, Francis Jeffrey, Samuel Johnson, Henry Home (Lord Kames), John Logan, Thomas MacDonald, James Mackintosh, Thomas Mathias, John Millar, James Burnett (Lord Monboddo), Arthur Murphy, Charles Philpot, Samuel Jackson Pratt, John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, William Robertson, William Roscoe, William Russell, Sir Walter Scott, Adam Smith, Dugald Stewart, Joseph Strutt, Thomas

Warton, Helen Maria Williams, and others. Phillips not only employs a variety of well- and lesser-known writers to fill in his detailed historiographical landscape, he also expands the boundaries of his canvas by aiming to approach the writing of eighteenth-century history from the perspective of these writers' readers. What does his innovative approach to the history of ideas produce?

Phillips argues that history was "reframed" in the eighteenth century. Looking across the chronological boundaries that traditionally are thought to separate eighteenth-century historiography from what came before and afterwards, Phillips notes continuity-in-change with shifts in emphasis. "Reframing" its subject matter, eighteenth-century historical writing incorporated topics such as private life, everyday manners, and commerce—topics that were not always, and sometimes could not have been, a concern of Greek and Roman historians or their humanist heirs. But Phillips's eighteenth-century "postclassical" historians are notably more modern than the early-modern historians who inhabit Philip Hicks's *Neoclassical History and English Culture, From Clarendon to Hume* (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1996). Reading between Phillips's lines shows him to be engaged in a running debate with Hicks, or so it seemed to this reviewer. At the same time that history's subject matter was widening, Phillips argues that the range of "distanciation," the sense of distance authors hoped to create between their readers and the recounted events and characters, also expanded. Classical historians like Tacitus increasingly were likely to be given a "sentimentalist rereading" by eighteenth-century readers (145). Eighteenth-century historians increasingly were likely to incorporate a sentimentalist perspective as they strove to understand the past not only with respect to the present but in its own terms as well. Readers were asked to identify with historical actors in new ways.

The readers of this journal, however, are likely to be most interested in what Phillips has to say about Hume's particular role in all of this. Phillips presents Hume the historian as "the single figure who most centrally marks out the ambitions and vocabularies of the historiography of Britain" (xv) in the eighteenth century. Phillips's reading of the literary intentions of Hume's *History of England* is solid. It includes informative discussions of Hume's use of irony, his character sketches, and his audience. Phillips argues convincingly that Hume aimed to "bring the past before us as an unmediated presence" but that he also had "a contrary need to seek closure and intellectual order" (61). The *History's* appendices are seen as important and are depicted by Phillips as "part of Hume's attempt to solve some of the pressing difficulties he faced in moving between two very different concepts of historical composition" (52). Ironically, Hume "helped to create expectations that ultimately

worked to make his own writing seem less adequate to new generations of readers" (344). Phillips argues that it was eighteenth-century innovations with "historical distance," as epitomized by Hume, that led nineteenth-century thinkers to reject Enlightenment historiography. Sentimental readings and diminished distances led to historicism, but did not equal it. When twentieth-century critics like R. G. Collingwood and Hayden White have looked down at eighteenth-century historiography, they have often done so through lenses crafted by their nineteenth-century predecessors.

Phillips aims to right other historiographical imbalances too. He justifiably claims that "Intellectual historians have given more thought to Hume's political and philosophical views than to the complex achievement of his narrative" (47). In his revisionist account, Phillips ably incorporates much of the growing secondary literature about Hume's *History*. There are occasional errors in references, such as when Hume scholar Donald Livingston becomes David Livingston (38n9). More importantly, some recent and relevant works—such as John B. Stewart's *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy* (1992) and Jennifer A. Herdt's *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (1997)—have been overlooked. Omitting Stewart's most recent book is especially curious given the attention Phillips gives to his earlier one.

Phillips's concentration on Hume's literary intentions does yield some of its own imbalances. An example might be cited in his analysis of Hume's account of the English Civil War factions. Hume summarized the manners of England's political parties as they appeared after the polarizing effects of the Civil War and Restoration:¹

No people could undergo a change more sudden and entire in their manners than did the English nation during this period. From tranquility, concord, submission, sobriety, they passed in an instant to a state of faction, fanaticism, rebellion, and almost frenzy. The violence of the English parties exceeded any thing which we can now imagine. No social intercourse was maintained between the parties; no marriages or alliances contracted The manners of the two factions were as opposite as those of the most distant nations. (*History of England* 6: 141)

Arguing that for Hume, "the fractious religiosity of the [seventeenth century] served as a constant reminder that those days were very different from his own" (74), Phillips provides the following reading of the above quoted Hume passage:

The only way to understand the profound transformations of the past century, he [Hume] seems to be saying, is to work in the very widest terms available, to adopt, in fact, the anthropological framework with which Enlightenment writers had learned to understand remote civilizations or barbaric tribes. How else to think about a habit of violence that he finds beyond present imagination? How else to imagine a social divide so deep that the English seemed split not merely into two nations, but distant ones at that? (76)

But reading Hume's account of the English Civil War factions within the context of his wider discussion of faction suggests Hume thought those barbaric manners may not have been so distant as he would wish or Phillips supposes. For Hume the negative effects of factions were especially prominent when any society became divided into polarized political and religious parties. In the *History* Hume speaks of the people of sixteenth-century France who

were divided into two theological factions, furious from their zeal, and mutually enraged from the injuries which they had committed or suffered; and as all faith had been violated and moderation banished, it seemed impracticable to find any terms of composition between them The religious connections had, on both sides, superseded the civil; or rather (for men will always be guided by present interest) two empires [were] secretly formed in the kingdom. (4: 167–8)

Many similar examples could readily be cited from Hume's writings. Hume did not consider violent antisocial factions to be a thing of the distant historical past. Reflecting on his personal travel in eighteenth-century Ireland, Hume wrote in his essay on the "Populousness of Ancient Nations" that "The country in EUROPE in which I have observed the factions to be most violent, and party-hatred the strongest, is IRELAND. This goes so far as to cut off even the most common intercourse of civilities between the Protestants and Catholics."² In his *A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart, Esq; late Lord Provost of Edinburgh, In a Letter to a Friend*, Hume expressed similar concerns about the rage of party in eighteenth-century Scotland. So it was that Hume could write in the *History* that the "spirit of faction" is "inherent in human nature" (4: 19) and so potentially divisive that it is "difficult for [even] a social and sanguine temper to guard against it" (3: 20). To return to Hume's passage about violent factions during the English Civil War, it is debatable whether Hume there thought he was dealing with a phenomenon safely distanced in Britain's remote past. To follow Phillips and "invoke Scott's

sense of looking back over an epochal divide" (76), may not be as useful for understanding Hume on faction as Phillips's reading of Hume's literary intentions suggests.

Finally, other aspects of Phillips's reading—such as his discussion of James Mackintosh's reading of Hume and an intriguing section on Burke and Hume on tradition—are equally stimulating and should help bring Hume's *History of England* to the forefront of modern Hume studies.

NOTES

1 *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1983).

2 *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1985), 640.

MARK G. SPENCER
Bentham Institute
Huron University College
1349 Western Road
London, Ontario, Canada
N6G 1H3
email: spencer@uwo.ca