



THOMAS REID. *The Correspondence of Thomas Reid*

Gordon Graham

Hume Studies Volume XXVIX, Number 2 (November, 2003) 378-380.

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/>

THOMAS REID. *The Correspondence of Thomas Reid*. Edited by Paul Wood. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002. Pp. xxvii + 356. ISBN 0-7486-1163-0, cloth, £95. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2003. Pp. xxvii + 356. ISBN 0-271-02283-3, cloth, \$95.

This book is volume 4 of the Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid. When the edition is complete, somewhat surprisingly it will be the first edition of Reid's Collected Works for about 150 years. This is evidence of the degree to which Reid was unjustly neglected during the same period—from the point at which his pre-eminence in Scottish philosophy and abroad began to fade (roughly 1845) until the first volume of this new edition appeared in 1995. "Unjustly" neglected is the key term here, because any proper appreciation of Reid's philosophical works must place him in the second rank of major philosophers, behind Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, or Kant certainly, but alongside Leibniz, Locke, and Berkeley, and arguably ahead of Hume, whose name has overshadowed his for such a long time.

If philosophical attention is returning to Reid, this is partly because of the Edinburgh Edition, which has both prompted and aided it. Accordingly, grateful thanks are due to its editors, among whom Paul Wood is prominent. This is the second of three volumes to be edited by him, and he will share in editing a fourth. Wood's name has long been associated with the study of Thomas Reid, and he brings to the two volumes so far published under his editorship an encyclopedic knowledge of the area and the material relevant to it. This volume of correspondence is expertly done. Wood has located and reproduced as accurately as possible all 131 extant letters not only from Reid and to him, but in a few cases *about* him (for example, the letter from Lord Deskford to William Cullen mentioning Reid's name as the fittest person in Scotland to succeed Adam Smith in the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow). Relatively few of these letters date from Reid's time at Aberdeen—a little less than 20—and the majority from the thirty-two years he spent in Glasgow. Appended to the correspondence are Reid's notes on a work of James Gregory's.

The editorial principles Wood has applied are clearly laid out at the beginning, and he has added to the text of the letters over seventy pages of explanatory and textual notes, a chronology of Reid's life and works, and two indices, one of subjects and places, the other of persons and titles, and a list of the known lost letters. All this additional material is very useful in making one's way intelligently about the collection. As a whole the volume

represents a huge amount of scholarly work that has put Reid's correspondence at the easy disposal of both historians and philosophers .

Once launched on such a project, completeness is obviously essential, but it is inevitable some items will be more interesting than others. And so indeed it proves. There are letters here to and from Hume, Kames, Gregory, and Dugald Stewart, important intellectual figures of Reid's time (though not all of them are intellectually important letters). But there are also short notes to and from relatives, acquaintances, colleagues, and business men that cannot be said to have more than curiosity value. And in the case of the letters *about* Reid, some people may not share the editor's estimation of what is worth including. For example, following the aforementioned letter from Lord Deskford (which is plainly of some interest), there is Reid's (short and largely formal) letter to Thomas Miller accepting the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow. But this is followed by Miller's three line covering note to the Principal of Glasgow University, the value of which is rather less clear. This is not by any means the only letter to raise this question. Certainly completeness is a virtue of a sort, but it does mean the inclusion of material of uncertain value.

One might make a similar point with respect to the volumes in the whole Edinburgh Edition; they are inevitably of varying value. To have really good texts of Reid's *Inquiry* and *Essays* is one thing; to have his complete letters is another. This is partly because, compared with other writers of the period, Reid's correspondence is singularly limited. Secondly, though remarkable for clarity of thought and style in his published works, Reid proves not to be a great stylist in his letters. Very few of them are worth reading in their own right. More important perhaps, surprisingly few of them throw much light on his philosophy, or intellectual endeavours more broadly. The exchange with Hume, for example, is evidently worth preserving, but it is of more anecdotal than intellectual interest. There are letters here that provide historical information about the period—Reid's letter to an anxious parent about the course of study his son would be following, for example—but few that offer much amplification of theoretical issues beyond what we can find in Reid's published works.

Dugald Stewart, in his *Life of Reid*, declared that Reid's letters were of little general interest. The dust jacket boldly declares that this volume "proves otherwise." Having perused it, I am inclined to share Stewart's view. According to the dust jacket, we have here illumination of virtually every aspect of Reid's life and work. This rather overstates the case, in my view. There is, for example, a fifteen line letter from Reid to Dugald Stewart written a month or so after the death of his (Reid's) wife. It is simple and affecting but not in any way illuminating of either his state of mind or his understanding of death. In

short, Reid was an interesting and important philosopher, but as I think Stewart meant to imply, his letters will never join the ranks of literature, even the lower ones, and they make no major contribution to the interpretation or amplification of his philosophy.

Any proper edition of Reid's works will aim to be complete as the Edinburgh one does, and will thus include his complete correspondence. But in the case of Reid, unlike some other philosophers, his letters have little to offer students of his philosophy, and if anything, even less to offer students of literature. Paul Wood has made an excellent job of the task of editing them, but I cannot imagine that the resulting volume will find many avid readers.

GORDON GRAHAM
University of Aberdeen
Aberdeen AB24 3UB
Scotland
g.graham@abdn.ac.uk