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MARK G. SPENCER, ed. *Hume's Reception in Early America*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002. 2 vols. Pp. xxvi + 278; xxi + 290. ISBN 1 85506 934 2, cloth £175.00/$265.00.

Mark Spencer has brought together eighty-seven American discussions, dating from 1758 to 1850, of Hume's work. A few of these discussions may previously have received scholarly attention, but most have not. A few of the items are brief, no more than a paragraph or two, and some others are slight, even as clues to the cultural history of the thirteen colonies and the United States they became (none of the authors reprinted was based in other parts of North America). But taken as a whole, the collection adds a valuable new dimension to that history and to our knowledge of Hume's reception in North America.[1] Many items provide useful background to Spencer's forthcoming book on the reception of Hume's political thought in eighteenth-century America.[2]

Spencer has divided his selections into four sometimes overlapping categories: Items related to Hume's *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*; to his "philosophical writings," including his writings on religion; to his *History of England*; and to his character and death. Among the eleven items included in part 1 are William Smith's "Dispute about the Tragedy of *Douglas* (1758); Alexander Hamilton's "Every Man Ought to be Supposed a Knave" (1775); John Adams's "A Complicated Aristocracy" (1787); and editorial contributions from Thomas Ewell's first American edition of Hume's *Philosophical Essays on Morals, Literature, and Politics* (1817), an edition, in effect, of the *Essays and Treatises*, more or less as they had appeared in 1777, but to which George Campbell's reply to Hume's "Of Miracles" was added as a propaedeutic against obvious irreligion.

Of the seventeen items concerned with Hume's explicitly philosophical writings, roughly half are discussions of Hume on miracles. Several of these essays aim to refute an opponent who has struck "at the foundation of our religion," whose argument "leads to atheism," and "whose writings are in the hands of almost all young persons" (1: 94, 114, 108), and say little that enhances our understanding of the issues Hume's essay raises. Two more philosophically valuable pieces are a chapter from Archibald Alexander's *Evidences of the Authenticity . . . of the Holy Scriptures* (1836), and Alexander Lawrence's *An Examination of Hume's Argument on the Subject of Miracles* (1845). One of the most interesting of the attempts to uncover the Humean principles and conclusions leading to atheism is that of Frederick Beasley. Hume's principles, says this author,

> lead by inevitable consequence to the rankest atheism. For, if as he asserts, we have no idea of power or efficiency in causes to produce their effects

> . . . and if moreover, we have no reason to believe, either from intuition, demonstration or experience, that there is any efficiency in any one thing to produce another; and . . . if when any effect is exhibited to us there be no good ground to conclude that there must have been a cause, there being no truth in the maxim, that whatever begins to exist must have a cause; the very foundation of the argument by which the existence of a God is proved is sapped and destroyed. (1: 164)

There may be, for the 1820s, nothing unusual about this assessment of Hume, but Beasley's concern about Hume's "baneful influence upon the Scottish school of metaphysicks" does come as a surprise. Thomas Reid, he points out, says that what we call "*natural* causes" have "no proper efficiency or causality, as far as we know," so that we can affirm with certainty no more than that "nature hath established a constant conjunction between them and the things called their effects" (citing Reid, *Inquiry concerning the Human Mind* 5.3). This according to Beasley "is precisely the language of Mr. Hume, and as far as the structure and operations of the physical world are concerned, to all intents and purposes, his doctrine" (1: 170). Even worse, both Reid and his uncritical disciple, Dugald Stewart (see 1: 190), having adopted Hume's mistaken view that there are no natural physical causes, go on to adopt the occasionalist view that "mind alone, either the mind of the Supreme Being or Spirits commissioned by him, can possess active power, or be, in the true sense of the word, efficient causes" (1: 184). But from this it follows, Beasley argues, that not only in the physical, but also in the moral world God is the "immediate operating cause of both evil and good . . . the true author of . . . the whole train of [moral] enormities which are perpetrated among mankind" (1: 199). In short, explaining events in the physical world by reference to "the agency of mind or the Supreme Being" provides only a delusive appearance of "truth and orthodoxy . . . We will not say that atheism was ever intended to be inculcated by the Professor [Stewart] . . . however, we do assert, that the ground taken by him is a very dangerous one," one that opens the door to the atheist (1: 207).

Spencer says that during "the last half of the eighteenth century, Hume was best known in America, as in Britain and continental Europe, for his *History of England*" (2: 3). This claim may under-estimate the widespread eighteenth-century interest in Hume's writings on metaphysics and religion, but the *History of England* was indeed popular in the colonies/states. The first American edition was printed in 1795–1796, but English editions were widely available, in both bookstores and libraries, well before that date. Of the Americans who wrote about the work, many objected to Hume's account of the causes, events, and persons associated with the English civil war. In a 1773 debate about the rights of a colonial governor, Charles Carroll and Daniel Dulany each made reference to Hume's account of Charles I

and his levy of "the ship-money tax." Carroll found in that account validating precedents for the action of the governor. Dulany in contrast saw Hume's history of the period as amounting to an unreliable "apology for the Stuarts, and particularly Charles the first" (2: 28–32). This negative assessment of the *History* was repeated and elaborated, apparently without significant opposition, throughout the beginning years of the American republic. The most thoughtful and detailed elaboration of it reprinted here is that of Edward Brooks. Comparing Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* to Hume's *History*, Brooks disputes Hume's claim that religion was the primary cause of the civil war. On the contrary, says Brooks, the causes also included such economic and legal injustices as monopolies, taxes (including ship money) imposed without the consent of parliament, forced loans, and commissions given "authority to supersede the established tribunals, and to try and punish offences by martial law" (2: 109–11). In a subsequent review of four works on English history, Brooks decried the widespread use of Hume's *History* as a textbook, and argued that Hume was wrong to represent the Puritans as intent on reforming the British constitution. They were, rather, resisting the curtailment of their rights, just as the American colonists, who "had always enjoyed the rights of British subjects" were "roused to the most determined resistance" by the attempt to levy taxes on them without giving them appropriate representation. To understand the grounds of "the resistance of the [then] colonies to the mother country . . . it is necessary that the student of American politics, should turn to the constitutional history of England, and inquire into the nature and origin of the British parliament." But this essential information is not to be found in Hume's *History*, and hence no "instructor in our day should place his work in the hands of a youth, leaving him to suppose that it contain[s] the truth" (2:122–3, 126–7).

Hume's open criticism of religion and the religious excited widespread and often tedious attempts to blacken his character, especially as this had been portrayed in Adam Smith's report of his behaviour during his last illness. It was Benjamin Rush who first published (in 1779), with little comment, the comparison between the death of the deist Hume and that of a Christian, the "*eminently Pious Servant of God*, Samuel Finley" (2: 196). Thirty years later the contrast was taken up again. While Finley was known to have spent his final days uttering pious thoughts, Smith reported that Hume spent his dying weeks diverting himself by correcting his works, reading books of amusement, conversing with friends, and playing whist, and thereby facing his end with complacency. This is not to be believed, said John Mason, D.D. "It is a farce: It is a mockery of every human feeling: and every throbbing of the heart convicts it of a lie" (2:224). Hume would doubtless have been pleased that one anonymous author responded to Mason by observing that, although he found Hume's works "as dangerous, as the most enthusiastick bigot can imagine them to be," it was nonetheless the case that, if "the temper

with which some good christians enter into controversies in speculative doctrines, bore any proportion in point of moderation, to that which is generally discovered among sceptical writers, we should stand a much better chance of discovering . . . the great object of our enquiry" (2: 235–6).

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NOTES

1 The volumes are marred by more than the expected number of typographical errors, and by the unusual decision to reproduce what "appear to be printer's mistakes in the originals," denoting these by a following "[sic]" (1: xxi), as, for example: "experience of the coure [sic] of nature" and "the same school of mephysicks [sic]" (1: 110, 163). There are less obtrusive ways of being scrupulous.

2 *Hume and Eighteenth-Century America* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, forthcoming).