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Hume's "Toryism" and the Sources for his Narrative of the Great Rebellion¹

In 1754 David Hume published the first volume of his *History of England*, covering the years 1603-1649. He was, he says,

sanguine in my Expectations of the Success of this work. I thought, that, I was the only Historian, that had at once neglected present Power, Interest, and Authority, and the Cry of popular Prejudices; and as the Subject was suited to every Capacity, I expected proportional Applause: But miserable was my Disappointment: I was assailed by one Cry of Reproach, Disapprobation, and even Detestation: English, Scotch, and Irish; Whig and Tory; Churchman and Sectary, Free-thinker and Religionist; Patriot and Courtier united in their Rage against the Man, who had presumed to shed a generous Tear for the Fate of Charles I, and the Earl of Strafford:²

Hume was so shaken by this storm and by the dismally bad sales of the book that he considered going into permanent exile in France. Fortunately for Hume, the next volume, which covered the years 1649 to 1688 and contained less that was politically offensive, was better received. "It not only rose itself; but helped to buoy up its unfortunate Brother."³ The two volumes on the Tudors, which next followed, were also badly received — presumably because of Hume's unfashionable views on the power of the monarchy and on the constitution. He held despite prevailing views that the Tudor monarchs had, in general, greater authority than their predecessors, and that in the Tudor and early Stuart period there was no constitution rigidly enough defined to enable us to speak realistically of Elizabeth or the Stuarts breaking it. The two medieval volumes, which were the last to be published of the history, contained little to offend — or at least little new to offend. In the end, the *History of England* became a classic.

The question of whether Hume wrote a "Tory" history has been much discussed.⁴ The discussion has been vexed by the further question of

what really is meant by "Tory", but seems to have resulted in two general conclusions. It has been found, first, that Hume as a historian either did not deserve the epithet "Tory" — which most of the writers in this controversy rather arbitrarily assume to be a derogatory one — or was a Tory of a particularly enlightened, intelligent, and flexible kind. It has been verified, secondly, that in its time the history was regarded commonly as "Tory" and by a few persons even as "Jacobite". In this discussion of Hume's Toryism, the nature of his break with the prevailing Whig views on the constitution and on the behaviour of the first two Stuarts has also been well described.

As to why the history was considered a Tory work in its own generation, I suggest that an explanation hitherto unexamined can be found in a survey of the sources used by Hume for his history of the first two Stuarts and the Civil War and the period of Puritan rule — the period from 1603 to 1660. This period includes the first volume together with a portion of the second. An examination of approximately the same results could be made on the basis of the first volume only, but it is desirable to include the portion from the following volume — that covering 1649 to 1660 — because the two narratives form a single whole, and because they form jointly that part of the history in which Hume's alleged "Tory" views are most pronounced. In dealing with the period after 1660, he leans, if anywhere, to the "popular" or Whig side in his narrative.

We know these sources from Hume's footnotes and from occasional comments in the text and in his correspondence. The footnotes were absent when the two Stuart volumes were first published, but Hume later repented⁵ of his failure to document his sources and added footnotes in the 1762 reissue of the Stuart volumes.

One of the things we learn by this means about his work as a historian is that he wrote the history of the Stuart period originally from exclusively printed sources. Later he got the view of a few manuscripts,⁶ but these led to only insignificant changes in his text. Hume has been criticized for not consulting manuscripts in his research, and this has been an important point in the indictment of him as a superficial researcher. The indictment is, however, lacking in balance as far as the years 1603-1660 are concerned, and for a very simple reason. When he was writing the history of this period, all the important public papers and many of the letters of its eminent public figures were available in print in collections such as those of Rushworth, Nalson, Frankland, Burnet (*Lives of the*

Hamiltons), and Thurloe, and it is evident from the *History* that Hume relied very heavily on these documents. Hume most decidedly did not in this portion of his history blindly follow memoirs and narrative histories. He too was a documentary historian.

Another limitation and a rather more surprising one is that the printed sources he cites for this period were nearly all composed in the seventeenth century. That is not to say that he did not find later works at least occasionally useful. He cites Carte's life of Ormond and Ralph's history of England and he was familiar with Rapin, whom he seems to have used somewhat excessively when he turned to the medieval period,⁷ but his narrative really does seem to be based for the Stuart period up to 1660 nearly wholly on his seventeenth-century sources rather than on later authorities. Within the limits of the seventeenth-century sources which were available in print, Hume was remarkably comprehensive. Few books which were of major importance to the task on which he was at work escaped him. There are only two really surprising omissions — Richard Baxter's autobiography, the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696)⁸ and Thomas Hobbes's history of the English Civil War, *Behemoth* (1679). Why he omitted Baxter's autobiography, which would have given him additional data on Puritanism and the social history of the rebellion, is hard to say. His poor opinion of Hobbes as a man is expressed in vitriolic language in the *History*,⁹ but it is unlikely that he neglected to read *Behemoth*. Perhaps he just decided to deny it the honour of being allowed to appear publicly among his sources.

Hume's biographer Burton has argued that part of the blame for Hume's "Tory" treatment of the contest between Charles I and his opponents must be placed on Clarendon. As Burton says correctly, Clarendon was Hume's principal guide through this section of the *History*.¹⁰ I suggest, however, that this idea of Burton's can be carried still further. As can be shown by a detailed examination of their writings,¹¹ the bias of the seventeenth-century English historians of the Great Rebellion is, taken as a whole, against the Parliament and in favour of the Royalists. Let me expand this statement slightly by sketching a broad outline of this historical writing.

Before the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, both Parliamentary and Royalist histories of the rebellion were published. Royalists in this period, such as Laud's biographer Peter Heylyn, spoke cautiously on behalf of the Royalist side in the national struggle. Parliamentarians defended their side, but no major Parliamentary historian appeared

except John Rushworth, who published the first volume of his *Historical Collections* in 1659. Nor in this period, in which Parliamentarians had opportunity to speak in their own defence, did Rushworth or anyone else do so with the plausibility and assurance with which Hobbes, Dugdale, Clarendon, and many others later in the century were to speak for the Royalists.

After the Restoration of the monarchy, the Parliamentarians were unable to publish as freely as before, while the Royalists found themselves wholly free to publish Royalist "truths". The result was that up to the Revolution of 1688 few parliamentary histories were published, and these provided no adequate defence of the Parliamentary cause. The most important was the *Memorials* of Bulstrode Whitelocke. Whitelocke, however, had been a most reluctant and unhappy Parliamentarian. While his mammoth history tells the story of the rebellion as seen from the Parliamentary lair at Westminster, he makes no attempt to justify the actions of the Parliamentarians. It is a good guess that he simply did not believe his side had been sufficiently in the right to be justified in inflicting on the country the immeasurable suffering of the Civil War.

We might expect that soon after the Revolution of 1688 numbers of defences of the Civil War Parliamentarians would have appeared from the press. But despite the appearance of Ludlow's lively memoirs and a few exceedingly feeble Whig histories, this did not happen. The century (and therefore the period from which Hume drew his materials) closed with the balance of historical writing strongly against the Parliamentarians. Perhaps what had happened was simply that the Royalists had won an ideological battle. After the revolt of the Parliamentary army against its masters of the Long Parliament, after the execution of the King, after the Cromwellian dictatorship, most of the old Parliamentarians seem simply to have accepted, to one degree or another, the truth of the Royalist charges levelled against them. This attitude, surviving throughout the remainder of the century even among persons unsympathetic to the Stuarts, must have worked powerfully against the composition of histories friendly to the Parliamentary side.

Such then were the sources Hume used for his narrative of the central and overwhelmingly important set of events of the years 1603-1660, and the more he let these sources tell their own tale the more favourable he must have become to James I and Charles I.

Hume's "Toryism" in his Stuart narrative arose in part, therefore.

out of his close attention to his sources, and can even be considered a form of revived Royalism. His decision to disregard the eighteenth-century writings on his subject enabled the seventeenth-century sources to speak all the more vigorously in his pages. And the fact that the sources he used were both Royalist *and* Parliamentary must have encouraged him in a belief that he was being a remarkably impartial historian. This belief in his own impartiality appears in the passage about the reception of the first volume which is quoted at the beginning of this essay, and he similarly complained in a letter of 1755 that "I thought I had been presenting to the Public a History full of Candor & Disinterestedness, . . . When behold! I am dub'd a Jacobite, Passive Obedience Man, Papist, & what not."¹² Unfortunately for Hume, a faithful student of the sources he chose to use could not appear an impartial historian in the intellectual climate of Hanoverian England.

NOTES

1. In its earliest form, this essay formed a part of my paper on "David Hume as Historian of the English Civil War," presented at a Seminar of the Association for 18th Century Studies, McMaster University, 15 January 1975.
2. Hume's autobiography, printed as appendix to E.C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1954), p. 613.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 614.
4. See especially E.C. Mossner, "Was Hume a Tory Historian?," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, II (1941), pp. 225-236; B.A. Ring, "David Hume: Historian or Tory Hack?," *North Dakota Quarterly*, Winter 1968, pp. 50-59; and Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 324-326.
5. David Hume to Horace Walpole, 2 August 1758, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), I, 284-285.
6. David Hume, *The History of England*, 13 vols. (London, 1825), VIII, 3; Mossner, *Hume*, p. 499.
7. G. Giarrizzo, *David Hume politico e storico* (Torino, Studi e ricerche, 1962), p. 264.
8. I discuss the social content of this autobiography in *Dalhousie Review*, XLIX (1969-1970), pp. 487-496.
9. Hume, *History*, VII, 335. Hume seems to allude to *Behemoth* once (*History*, VI, 412n.) but he probably draws the allusion from a reference to *Behemoth* in Sir Philip Warwick's *Memoires* (London, 1701), p. 197.
10. J.H. Burton, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1846), I, 403-404.
11. As in my study of these historians, *Restoration Historians and the English Civil War* (The Hague, International Archives of the History of Ideas, 1974).
12. David Hume to William Strahan, 3 May 1755, *The Letters of David Hume*, I, 221-222.