Introduction: The Love of Literary Fame

'HAD HUME DIED at the age of twenty-six his real work in the world would have been done, and his fame irrevocably established'.[1] So wrote Lytton Strachey in a brief piece on Hume collected in *Portraits in Miniature*. By twenty-six Hume had completed the first two volumes of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 'the masterpiece which contains all that is most important in his thought'. The *Treatise*, though, was 'a complete failure', and there followed years of poverty and insignificance. Hume wrote a series of essays on a variety of topics during these years, but there was nothing in those essays that Strachey felt compelled to note or discuss. *The History of England* could not be ignored in the same way. It had had great success in Hume's lifetime, and after his death it remained for many years the standard work on the subject. But it was too typical of its time to be taken seriously now. 'The virtues of a metaphysician are the vices of a historian', declared the author of *Elizabeth and Essex*. 'A generalised, colourless, unimaginative view of things is admirable when one is considering the law of causality, but one needs something else if one is to describe Queen Elizabeth'.[2] The years following *The History of England* are for Strachey, as for many before and after him, the stuff of anecdote and no more. The corpulent Hume, awkward and tongue-tied in the face of the adulation of Paris, is brought before the reader. So is the corpulent Hume stuck in the mud of the Nor' Loch back in Edinburgh, able, despite his atheism, to recite the Lord's Prayer in order to get help from a passing fishwife. And so is the no longer corpulent Hume making jokes on his deathbed about excuses he might offer Charon to put off death for a little while longer.

Strachey makes it sound as though an intellectual biography of Hume must be, if not pointless, then at least very brief. Hume had, after all, thought all his most important thoughts by the age of twenty-six. During his intellectual maturity, according to Strachey, Hume wrote nothing that any longer had a claim on the reader's attention. And the final period of his life was a time of 'repose'. Today the writings that followed the *Treatise*

are given proper attention. *The History of England*, after a period of neglect that continued until the mid-twentieth century, has readers again. Hume's last years have been shown not to be so empty of intellectual endeavour as Strachey implies. Almost every aspect of Hume's thought, in fact, is now the object of scholarly examination, and there has developed a consensus concerning Hume's intellectual achievement taken as a whole that appears to amount to a complete reversal of Strachey's interpretation. The appearance, however, is deceptive. There is a significant respect in which Strachey's way of reading Hume's intellectual development remains unquestioned. In this Introduction I trace the historical origins of Strachey's view of Hume, and show how its fundamental premise functions as the basis also of more recent work. I then propose a different way of conceiving of Hume's intellectual life. My suggestion is that we take seriously Hume's description of himself as having intended from the beginning to live the life of a man of letters. He is best seen not as a philosopher who may or may not have abandoned philosophy in order to write essays and history, but as a man of letters, a *philosophical* man of letters, who wrote on human nature, on politics, on religion, and on the history of England from 55 BC to 1688. To understand Hume's intellectual biography, therefore, we need to understand what it was to be a man of letters in Britain in the middle of the eighteenth century – and also what was distinctive about Hume's construal of the literary vocation. Having summarized the contents of the chapters of this book, I reflect briefly in conclusion on the story that Hume told about his career as a man of letters in 'My Own Life'.

Approaches to Hume's Intellectual Biography

The first book-length biography of Hume, by Thomas Edward Ritchie, was published in 1807.[3] As its reviewers complained, Ritchie's book was little more than a collection of Hume's letters and miscellaneous minor writings and withdrawn essays, along with a connecting narrative largely based on Hume's 'My Own Life'.[4] In conclusion, though, Ritchie turned from Hume's life to his writings. 'In his literary character', Ritchie wrote, 'Mr. Hume is to be considered, 1. As a *metaphysician:* 2. As a *moralist:* 3. As a *writer on general polity:* and 4. As a *historian*'.[5] It quickly becomes clear that Ritchie took it to be uncontroversial that considered under the first three of these descriptions, Hume had achieved nothing. Ritchie's

observations and criticisms suggest that he himself was a disciple of Thomas Reid. The premises from which Hume had set out in Book One of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* were, according to Ritchie, 'essentially wrong', in so far as they saw Hume take for granted the existence of *ideas* as the immediate objects of perception and thought, and take for granted also the applicability of 'the laws of matter' to the operations of the mind. And it was not surprising that from essentially wrong premises Hume came to essentially wrong, because essentially sceptical, conclusions about the mind's cognitive powers. Even so, Hume's writings on these topics 'may be useful, for truth is often elicited and established by the collision of opinion and the boldness of disquisition'.[6] As for Hume's writings on morality, they were vitiated by the belief that 'mere usefulness' is the basis of virtue. The style of the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* was agreeable enough, and there were lessons on politeness in the book not inferior to those to be found in Chesterfield's letters to his son – 'But the seductive picture which Mr. Hume has given of the general principle of *utility* may be reversed by another writer, and perverted to the worst of purposes'.[7] The essays on commercial and constitutional subjects, Ritchie continued, deserved only superficial notice because they were themselves so superficial. In almost every case, Ritchie observes, Hume devoted about five pages to subjects that had, in the hands of other writers, 'given rise to volumes'.[8] There was nothing, in other words, contained in the two volumes of Hume's *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* that merited attention. No one other than philosophers seeking to learn from his errors would have continued to read Hume had it not been for his much more solid achievement in the field of history. In the *History of England*, Ritchie declared, 'we every where recognize an indefatigable perseverance in research, a manly independence of thinking, and a happy talent in the discrimination of character'.[9] The *History* 'is a source of useful information to the statesman, a noble monument of its author's talents, and an invaluable bequest to his country'.[10]

Ritchie succeeds in making it sound as though all the alarm, anxiety, and outrage caused by Hume in his own day, with respect to religion in particular, had dissipated almost completely in the thirty years since Hume's death in 1776. The passing of one generation was all that it had taken for the threat that men such as Johnson, Warburton, and Beattie had perceived in Hume's writings to be felt no longer. The errors

contained in Hume's 'metaphysical' writings were errors still, but they were not dangerous. Rather, they could be seen as a means whereby a better philosophy had been developed. This was the view not only of Ritchie but also of Dugald Stewart in a 'dissertation' on the history of philosophy since the Renaissance written for the fifth (1815–17) edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Hume's *Treatise*, according to Stewart, 'has contributed, either directly or indirectly, more than any other single work to the subsequent progress of the philosophy of the human mind'.[11] This could be said without it being implied that any of Hume's conclusions were to be endorsed. As read by Stewart, Hume's 'aim is to establish a universal scepticism, and to produce in the reader a complete distrust in his own faculties. For this purpose he avails himself of the data assumed by the most opposite sects, shifting his ground skilfully from one position to another as best suits the scope of his present argument. With the single exception of Bayle, he has carried this sceptical mode of reasoning farther than any modern philosopher'.[12] Hume's conclusions are 'often so extravagant and dangerous, that he ought to have regarded them as proof of the unsoundness of his data' – and that was precisely how those who came after him did regard them. Hume prepared the way for Reid, and also for Kant – according to Stewart an exponent of an essentially Reidian style of philosophizing. Hume was entirely correct in his arguments showing that belief in fundamental cognitive and practical principles could not be given a rational justification. Where he went wrong was in believing that this was an inherently sceptical conclusion. The 'defect in the evidence of these truths' proceeded, as Stewart saw it, following Reid, 'from their being *self-evident*, and consequently unsusceptible of demonstration'.[13] Reid's account of the nature and role of self-evident principles of belief made worry about Hume's scepticism unnecessary. For this reason, perhaps, Hume barely featured at all in the writings of the next great representative of the Scottish philosophical tradition, Sir William Hamilton. According to Hamilton, Hume represented a moment of crisis, when philosophers had been forced to choose between two alternatives, 'either of surrendering philosophy as null, or of ascending to higher principles, in order to re-establish it against the sceptical reduction'.[14] The crisis had passed, philosophers like Reid and Kant had chosen ascent to higher principles – and so Hume could be allowed to slip away into the past, even while, 'mediately or immediately', every subsequent philosophical advance had to be referred to him.[15]

In Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century, the real question concerning Hume was about his *History of England*. There continued to be confident celebration of, in the words of John Allen in 1825, 'those general and comprehensive views, that sagacity and judgement, those masterly lessons of political wisdom, that profound knowledge of human nature, that calm philosophy, and dispassionate balancing of opinions, which delight and instruct us in the pages of Hume'.[16] Twenty years later, Henry Brougham could declare that Hume was the first British historian of eminence, 'decidedly to be praised as having been the first to enter the field with the talents of a fine writer, and the habits of a philosophic enquirer'.[17] His metaphysical writings, on the other hand, were characterized by what Brougham called 'a love of singularity, an aversion to agree with other men, and particularly with the bulk of the people' – which was not surprising given that the *Treatise* was written while Hume was 'at an age when the distinction of differing with the world, the boldness of attacking opinions held sacred by mankind at large, is apt to have most charms for vain and ambitious minds'.[18]

But as the decades passed, two waves of criticism were gathering in intensity.[19] On the one hand, Hume was condemned on account of the scantiness of his research and his reliance on printed sources. An important impetus for this line of attack was George Brodie's 1822 *History of the British Empire*, a reassertion of Whig complaints about Hume as a historian that provided the occasion for further assaults in the same vein by Francis Jeffrey in *The Edinburgh Review* and the young John Stuart Mill in *The Westminster Review*. With apparently devastating thoroughness Brodie sought to show that Hume had failed to make proper use even of those documents that were available to him in the 1750s. '[H]aving embarked in his undertaking with a pre-disposition unfavourable to calm inquiry after truth, and being impatient of that unwearied research which . . . with unremitting industry sifts and collates authorities,' Brodie claimed, Hume 'allowed his narrative to be directed by his predilections, and overlooked the materials from which it ought to have been constructed'.[20] This told Mill that Hume's *History of England* 'is really a romance; and bears nearly the same degree of resemblance to any thing which really happened, as *Old Mortality* or *Ivanhoe*'.[21] To Jeffrey it suggested that Hume's 'credit among historians, for correctness of assertion, will soon be nearly as low as it has long been with theologians for orthodoxy of belief'.[22] At the same time, Hume came to seem a failure as a historian for a rather different reason – in

fact, precisely because of his calm philosophy and dispassionate balancing of opinions. For Mill a contrast with the new kind of history being written by Thomas Carlyle was all that was necessary to force the point home. Hume fails, Mill argued in a review of Carlyle's *French Revolution: A History*, to present his protagonists as real flesh-and-blood human beings. He leaves us ignorant of what it was like to be them, of what really passed in their minds and excited their hearts.[23] The two waves of criticism broke at the same time, in 1849, when the first volume of Macaulay's *History of England from the Accession of James II* appeared. Macaulay had clearly done a lot more research than Hume had. But also, as one reviewer put it, where Hume, like Gibbon after him, had written for the intellect only, in Macaulay we find 'pictured to ourselves the living and actual reality of the men, and the times, and actions he describes'.[24]

If one book can be said to have decisively altered the state of the debate about Hume in the nineteenth century, and to have made his philosophy matter once more just as his history began to fade from view, it was Mill's *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865). Despite his hostility to Hume's history writing, and to Hume's politics more generally, Mill was a recognizably Humean philosopher, intent on using 'associationism' to destroy a philosophy – a combination of Reid and Kant – which had supposedly given Hume a definitive answer.[25] In the wake of Mill's demolition of Hamilton, Hume's scepticism seemed troubling again. In the mid-1880s, Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison was sure that Hume's real significance had not yet been properly grasped,[26] and James Hutchison Stirling argued that Kant had not, in fact, answered Hume.[27] In Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), the Reidian reply to Hume was depicted as a failure. On Stephen's account, the fundamental problems exposed by Hume were much more intractable than had been generally acknowledged, and called for solutions that British philosophers of the eighteenth century were unable so much as to conceive of. The moral to be drawn, and the moral that Hume drew, was the necessity of giving up philosophy altogether, and of 'turning entirely to experience'. Hume's ablest contemporaries – Stephen names William Robertson and Gibbon – followed his example in 'abandoning speculation' in favour of history.[28] But, Stephen continued, a purely empiricist, or positivist, history was bound to be unsatisfactory. It was doomed by 'an incapacity to recognise the great forces by which history is moulded, and the continuity which gives to it real unity'.[29]

For the same reason – an inability to see 'the great forces which bind men together' – a political philosophy based solely on experience was also impossible. History and political society were both reduced to meaningless collections of facts, with no connecting principles.

In this way Stephen sketched what would prove to be an influential conception of the shape of Hume's career as an author. Hume began as a philosopher, the story went, but in the *Treatise* reasoned himself into a position which made philosophy look as though it had destroyed itself under the pressure of systematic sceptical argumentation. Therefore, he turned from philosophy to subjects which could be treated purely empirically, such as politics, political economy, and history, but in each case the work that he produced was evidence that, as Stephen put it, his power as a destroyer was much greater than his abilities as a creator.[30] Moreover, what prevented him from creating anything worthwhile in politics, political economy, and history was, precisely, the philosophical conclusions which he had come to in the *Treatise*. Hume's scepticism left him trying to make ropes of sand in his writings on these topics. James McCosh put essentially the same narrative to work in *The Scottish Philosophy . . . from Hutcheson to Hamilton* (1875). The *Treatise*, according to McCosh, was undoubtedly Hume's major work. 'He devoted to it all the resources of his mighty intellect'.[31] But what he discovered in the process was the futility of philosophy as such – conceived of as 'the science of metaphysics'. Hume, therefore, renounced philosophy and turned to entirely different kinds of questions – on McCosh's account, to attempting (vainly) to show that 'there could be a science of ethics (and also of politics) founded on the circumstance, that certain acts are found to be agreeable and useful to ourselves and others'.[32] His efforts in his later writings, however, merely showed that '[w]hatever merit Hume may have in demolishing error, he has . . . established very little positive truth'.[33] *The History of England* was a monument to Hume's 'perseverance in his life plan, in spite of discouragements', but it would be easy to show 'that the work, taken as a whole, is an illustration of his metaphysical and ethical theory'.[34]

This idea that Hume's intellectual development had two principal phases – the discovery in the *Treatise* of the apparent impossibility of progress in philosophy, followed by the taking up of non-philosophical issues thereafter – was developed comprehensively, and with a large dose of vitriol, by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose in the introductions to their

editions of the *Treatise* (1874) and of *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (1875). For Green and Grose, as for Stephen, what Hume inadvertently showed in the *Treatise* was the necessity of the Kantian revolution in philosophy. Hence 'the suddenness with which his labours in philosophy came to end': Hume 'had brought his criticism of philosophy to a point where, as he saw clearly, negation had done its work, and either he must leave the subject, or else attempt a reconstruction'.[35] Grose gave a moralized inflection to his account of what happened next. Lacking both appetite and ability for the work of 'reconstruction' in philosophy, Hume succumbed to his appetite for literary fame and devoted himself, by all means possible, to exciting public attention. 'Few men of letters', according to Grose, 'have been at heart so vain and greedy of fame as was Hume'.[36] Hume was charged with abandoning philosophy out of ignoble motives by his friends among late nineteenth-century philosophers as well as by his enemies. Echoing Mill's judgement in his essay on Bentham that Hume was 'the prince of *dilettanti*',[37] T. H. Huxley, in his book on Hume for the series 'English Men of Letters' (1879), regretted Hume's lack of application. Having seen through to the truth that, as Huxley put it, 'philosophy is based upon psychology; and that the inquiry into the contents and operations of the mind must be conducted upon the same principles as a physical investigation', Hume gave up on the whole business, exhibiting as he did so 'no small share of the craving after mere notoriety and vulgar success, as distinct from the pardonable, if not honourable, ambition for solid and enduring fame'. That is, he forsook 'philosophical studies' and took up instead 'those political and historical topics which were likely to yield, and did in fact yield, a much better return of that sort of success which his soul loved'.[38] In his edition of the two *Enquiries* (1894), L. A. Selby-Bigge accused Hume of lacking a philosophical justification for the omissions and additions made as he composed the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. They could be explained only in terms of Hume wanting to make himself more interesting to 'the *habitués* of coffee-houses', and of his wanting also to distinguish himself by offending those of a religious turn of mind.[39]

Thus we see how it was that Lytton Strachey could be so confident that Hume's real work was done by the time he was twenty-six. This view did not die out when the philosophical commitments that motivated it – broadly Kantian in the case of Stephen and McCosh, Hegelian in the case of Green – became less fashionable, for it survived among the logical

positivists who identified Hume as the progenitor of their programme for the wholesale destruction of 'metaphysics' and the transformation of philosophy, strictly distinguished from empirical science, into the a priori analysis of concepts and meanings.[40] However, it began to be questioned early on in the twentieth century, most notably by Norman Kemp Smith and John Laird. Both set out to undermine the nineteenth century's view of Hume's achievement as purely negative and destructive. Both took seriously the programme for a 'science of man' described in the introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, and both portrayed that programme as the framework in which all of Hume's subsequent work needed to be understood. All of Hume's work, in other words, went together to constitute a unified and systematic study of human nature. This has been a very influential idea in Hume scholarship over the past one hundred years. I believe, however, that it has been just as harmful to serious thought about Hume's intellectual development as was the view that Hume abandoned philosophy in favour of the pursuit of money and fame.

In two important articles on 'The Naturalism of Hume' published in the *Mind* in 1905 and then in *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941), Kemp Smith dismissed the view of Hume as, in Mill's words, 'the profoundest negative thinker on record'.[41] Far from being, as Stephen had put it, an 'absolute sceptic' who had shown 'that all reasoning was absurd',[42] Hume was, according to Kemp Smith, a philosopher propounding a new theory of human nature. Hume's scepticism was but a prologue to a revolution in thought whereby the priority of reason over passion was reversed, with reason left subordinated to feeling not only in the domain of morals, as Hutcheson had claimed, but also in the domain of belief considered more generally. This was a complete rejection of 'the traditional, Platonico-Cartesian view of reason as the supreme legislator for human life', in favour of the idea that 'Man, no less than the animals, lives under the tutelage of Nature, and must find in *its* dictates, not in any programme which has to justify itself to reason, the ultimate criteria alike of belief and of action'.[43] Kemp Smith's desire to discredit the late nineteenth-century view of Hume made it necessary for him to consider the question of whether Hume was unduly influenced by unworthy motives in giving up on the *Treatise* in favour of essays and history writing. Kemp Smith argued that he was not. The truth, he suggested, was that, when one considered Hume's career as a whole, it was the *Treatise*, and in particular Books I and II, that looked anomalous. Hume was interested above all in the connection

between philosophy and what Kemp Smith terms 'general life'. His ideal was philosophy conceived of as 'a department of literature, accessible to all intelligent readers, and in living contact with contemporary thought'. Such a philosophy had its origins in moral philosophy and concerned itself principally with 'criticism, political theory, economics, and what is so closely bound up with them, especially with morals and political theory, the study of history'. These matters were the object of Hume's earliest 'programme of work'. This was what one must infer, at any rate, from Hume's 'repeated assertion that his mental interests, from his earliest years, were equally divided between *belles lettres* and philosophy, and that literature, as he tells us, was the passion of his life and the source of his chief enjoyments'. The years spent on Books I and II of the *Treatise* saw Hume 'temporarily deflected from the path which he had marked out for himself'.[44]

According to Kemp Smith, it was with moral philosophy that Hume began, and Hume's career after the *Treatise* could be seen as proceeding in conformity with the 'teaching' of Book III. It made perfect sense that he moved from there to political and economic problems, 'and in natural sequence to the application of his political theory in the writing of his *History*'.[45] All that Hume wrote, in other words, developed out of his earliest philosophical insights. So what remains in place in Kemp Smith's version of Hume's intellectual biography is, first, the belief that the earliest phase of Hume's career was the most important, and, second, that everything else is to be understood in terms of its relations with that first phase. These ideas can be seen at work also in John Laird's *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature* (1932). Laird asserted that Strachey was guilty only of some exaggeration in his claim that all Hume's real work was done by the time he was twenty-six. Everything that Hume wrote in later life, 'not excepting the *History* and the discussions of religion', had 'obvious roots' in the pre-*Treatise* period. That period, therefore, required a more extensive discussion than the whole of the rest of Hume's life.[46] When Laird turned in his final chapter to Hume's politics, economics, history, and criticism, it was with a view to considering how far they showed Hume to have completed, in the fullness of time, 'his design of a science of human nature'.[47] It could with some justification be said, in fact, that Laird's particular version of how Hume's early years shaped his later writings proved more influential than Kemp Smith's. For while few Hume scholars accepted Kemp Smith's story of Hume having taken his

constructive philosophical project direct from Hutcheson and the theory of a moral sense, claims made by Laird about the enduring significance for Hume of the project of a 'Newtonianism of the Human Mind' became firmly embedded in the Hume literature by the middle of the twentieth century. It became common to assert that all of Hume's writings were to be seen as developments of the science of human nature initiated in the *Treatise*, and that it was for this reason a mistake to claim, as so many nineteenth-century commentators had, that after the *Treatise* Hume had given up philosophy in favour of other kinds of literary endeavour.[48]

Just as a case could be made for the influence of prevailing philosophical fashion on the late nineteenth-century view of Hume's intellectual development, so twentieth-century readings of Hume can be understood as having been shaped by wider trends in philosophy itself. The interpretations of Hume offered by Kemp Smith and Laird were attractive in a philosophical environment where naturalism, broadly and variously construed, was being embraced as fruitful approach to the understanding of mind, meaning, knowledge, and morals. Barry Stroud, for example, in his book on Hume for the Routledge series 'The Arguments of the Philosophers' (1977), explicitly sought to reclaim Hume from the logical positivists who had defined philosophy in narrow terms as a priori conceptual analysis. According to Stroud, the essence of Hume's thought in the *Treatise* could be separated from the theory of ideas and portrayed, rather, in terms of the grounding of meaning and concepts in 'what people actually think, and feel, and do in human life'.[49] This was a philosophical project that had also been pursued, albeit in contrasting ways, by Wittgenstein and by Quine. Stroud located Hume's science of man in a tradition that entered the twentieth century by way of Marx and Freud. So did Annette Baier, in *A Progress of Sentiments* (1991). Hume's was a science of human nature that was *not*, she claimed, properly read as a prefiguring of the aims of modern day psychology. It was rather part of 'a broader discipline of reflection on human nature, to which Charles Darwin and Michel Foucault, as much as William James and Sigmund Freud, can be seen to belong'.[50] Hume's naturalism was to be explicated in terms of a demonstration that our conception of reason itself needed to be 'enlarged', so that rationality was revealed as 'a social capacity, both in its activities and in the standards of excellence by which they are judged'.[51] Hume's analyses of the passions and of morals in Books II and III of the *Treatise* were, on Baier's reading, essential to this enlargement of reason.

Stroud claimed that on 'the general interpretation' that he offered of the *Treatise*, Hume's later books 'can be seen as much more of a piece with his philosophical work than has usually been supposed'.[52] And Baier claimed that the 'quest' that was begun in the *Treatise* was 'continued in later works'.[53] Spencer Wertz's *Between Hume's Philosophy and History* explicitly presents itself as a tracing of Baier's understanding of that quest on into the later works. Wertz is one of those who have challenged the idea that Hume's turn to history amounted to an abandonment of philosophy by arguing that, on the contrary, history was part of Hume's philosophy from the outset. In 1965 David Fate Norton argued that Hume's philosophy and his history 'are simply different aspects of the same over-all philosophical skepticism'. Hume's science of man was, 'like other skeptics' inquiry into man's nature and opinions', 'historically based'.[54] According Donald Livingston in *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (1984), 'it is clear that Hume at no time abandoned philosophy for history': 'From the beginning and throughout his career as a writer, he was engaged in historical work as well as in the philosophical problems to which such work gives rise'. But also, the sceptical character of Hume's philosophy determined the kind of history he wrote: a narratological study of conventions, saved from relativism by the existence of a 'governing story line' in the form of 'the story of the progress of the human mind'.[55] A broadly similar unifying account of Hume's work as a whole, interpreted in terms of an account of 'the historical dimension of rationality', was proposed by Claudia Schmidt in *David Hume: Reason in History* (2003).[56] In all of these studies of Hume's works the *Treatise* is given prime importance in the understanding of Hume's intellectual development. In his first book, it is claimed, Hume set himself a task that he spent the rest of his life completing. Indeed it has become a commonplace of Hume scholarship that there is a fundamental unity and continuity to his thought. Assertions to that effect have become a routine feature of textbook accounts of Hume's philosophy.[57] But it must be the case, on this way of reading Hume, that there is a large amount of truth to Strachey's picture of Hume as having thought all his important thoughts prior to the publication of the *Treatise*. Everything that Hume ever wrote *was* contained within his first book. His later work merely drew out that first book's implications. There was no real development in Hume's intellectual life, no new ideas of any significance, no important sense in which his interests changed with the passing of the years. If that is so, then it is still doubtful whether Hume

had an intellectual biography worth writing. There is a system to describe, but not much of a story to tell.

In *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (1975), Duncan Forbes issued a challenge to all readings of Hume which privilege the philosophy of the *Treatise* and insist on understanding the rest of his literary output in terms of that philosophy. Part of what Forbes called 'a more truly historical approach to political thought' had to be, he claimed, 'an attempt to counter the tendency to rely almost exclusively on internal lines of communication in the interpretation of a given thinker' – 'which', he added, 'in Hume's case usually means trying to connect everything to his philosophy, as though he lived in a cocoon of his own spinning'.[58] Forbes did not go so far as to attempt to understand *Essays, Moral and Political* and *The History of England* in complete isolation from the *Treatise*. On the contrary, he presented the 'modern theory of natural law' that Hume laid out in *Treatise* Book III as the 'foundation' of a science of politics. But Forbes took very seriously the task of trying to understand the *Essays* and the *History* in terms of their various contexts, intellectual and political, rather than solely in terms of ways in which they might be related to themes and arguments from the *Treatise*.[59] In this regard, Forbes's work has been a major source of inspiration for the account I give in this book of Hume's intellectual biography considered as a whole. For there seems to me to be no evidence that Hume himself regarded the enormously ambitious 'compleat system of the sciences' announced in introduction to the *Treatise of Human Nature* as providing a rationale for all that he wrote afterwards. Hume did not say that either *Essays, Moral and Political*, or *Political Discourses*, or *The History of England* was to be read in that way.[60] In later life Hume nowhere described himself as thinking of his works as a unity of any kind at all. Once he had given up on the *Treatise*, Hume never once presented himself as a systematic thinker, as someone who conceived of his writings in terms of foundation and superstructure, or of core and periphery, or of trunk and branches. The abandonment of the project of the *Treatise* would appear, on the contrary, to have been the giving up of the whole idea of a philosophical system, in favour of several distinct and different kinds of philosophical projects.[61]

The danger in insisting nevertheless on the unity and systematicity of Hume's writings taken as a whole is that the particularity of those various philosophical projects threatens, not so much to disappear from view, as never to come into view in the first place. For everything proceeds upon

the assumption that we know from the outset, because of what we are told in the *Treatise*, what the character of Hume's philosophical ambitions is. Hume's interest in politics, and what he intended to do in writing on politics as he did, is simply subsumed into the overall project of a 'science of man'. So are his interests and intentions in political economy, in religion, and in history. The inevitable result is a foreshortening, so to speak, of our picture of Hume and his intellectual development. What happens at the beginning is given a great deal of attention, while what happens later on appears diminished in interest and significance. It becomes harder to conceive of Hume developing new concerns and projects, to conceive of him conceiving of himself, and of his writings, in new ways. The idea that things he read after 1739 might have effected fundamental intellectual transformations becomes harder to take seriously. It becomes difficult to imagine Hume reacting to changes in personal, social, and political circumstances. And it becomes all too easy for Hume's reader to assume that they know from the outset what philosophy was for Hume, to assume that what makes the *Treatise* philosophical is the same thing that makes Hume's politics philosophical, that makes his political economy philosophical, that makes his religion philosophical, that makes his history philosophical. Reaction against the idea that Hume 'abandoned' philosophy for other things has in this way produced a picture of Hume no less inimical to serious thought about his intellectual development. Another approach is needed if we are to be sure that we take each of Hume's major works on its own terms, as an independent and distinct expression of its author's genius, and if we are to diminish the temptation to regard any one of those works as plainly more important than the rest.[62]

Hume as Man of Letters

In 'My Own Life', the brief autobiography written in April 1776, Hume told the reader that almost all his life had been 'spent in literary occupations'. Very early in his life, he wrote, he 'was seized with a passion for literature, which has been the ruling passion of my life, and the great source of my enjoyments'. His family wanted him to be a lawyer – 'but I found an unsurmountable aversion to every thing but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning'. In his twenties he resolved 'to regard every object as contemptible, except the improvement of my talents in literature'. His first book was a most unfortunate 'literary attempt'. Many

of the rest of his books were harshly criticized, but he succeeded in keeping himself clear of 'literary squabbles'. In moving from the country to the city in 1751, he established himself in 'the true scene for a man of letters'. At the time of writing he saw signs of improvements in his 'literary reputation', and so there was gratification, at the very end, of the 'love of literary fame' that had always been his 'ruling passion'.[63] 'Literature' in the eighteenth century did not mean, as it often does now, a distinct class of writing, including poetry, novels, and plays, such as might be grouped together by language on library shelves, or examined as an academic subject. 'Literature' was not something intrinsically different from 'history', 'philosophy', 'politics', or 'divinity'. In his *Dictionary of the English Language* Johnson defined 'literature' as simply 'Learning; skill in letters'.[64] The man of letters, then, was a man of learning. But he was also a man of a particular kind of learning – of, to use Hume's phrase, *general* learning. To call yourself a man of letters was to distance yourself both from the academic specialisms of the university and from the narrow and pedantic obsessions of the gentleman *érudit*. Several times in 'My Own Life' Hume referred to his 'studies', and he was glad to be able to say that during the last period of his life he had been able to prosecute those studies with 'the same ardour as ever'.[65] We are not meant to infer from this that throughout his life Hume relentlessly concentrated upon a small number of topics. On the contrary, the implication of having described himself as a man of letters is that Hume ranged freely, if not across all of 'learning', then across many of its domains. Philosophy was one of his interests, but only one. When his family supposed he was reading legal textbooks, he was in reality reading not only Cicero but also Virgil.[66]

It may have been that early on Hume took his conception of the life of letters from the writings of Shaftesbury, and, perhaps, especially from Shaftesbury's 'Advice to an Author'. There he would have found a dismissal of pedantry and erudition for its own sake, and an emphasis upon the importance of learning as providing a general nourishment for all of the powers of the mind. What Shaftesbury believed that the author needed to establish for himself was a self-knowledge that would give him an independence of the vagaries of opinion, faction, and fashion. 'My Own Life' suggests, however, that Hume soon came to have a rather more down-to-earth conception of the independence of a man of letters. One of the main themes of 'My Own Life' is Hume's journey from having the 'very slender fortune' of the younger brother in a family that 'was

not rich' to being, by the age of sixty, 'very opulent', with 'a revenue of 1000 l. a year'.[67] The independence that mattered was brutely financial. But it was also important where the money came from. The life of the man of letters as Hume conceived of it was incompatible with dependence on the patronage of a member of the nobility or, as was common during the age of Walpole, of a politician. It was incompatible also with dependence on being given work by a publisher. It may be that Hume's model as he fashioned himself as a man of letters was Pope, the first writer in English to alter the balance of power between author and publisher and achieve financial success on his own terms.[68] Pope showed that a writer, if he were sufficiently good, and had sufficient business acumen, did not need a patron or employer. This new model of authorship made some uncomfortable. Writing for money sounded mercenary and generally unrespectable. The old culture of aristocratic patronage might, in a way, have been a surer guarantee of literary integrity and independence.[69] If Hume had any worries on this score, he never confessed them. The tone of 'My Own Life' was one of unabashed pride in his own financial success. Hume positively trumpeted the fact that the money he received from his booksellers 'much exceeded any thing formerly known in England', and that it made him not just independent but also opulent.[70] Another role model may have been Voltaire, who, while not averse to the patronage of the great, was a very capable marketer of his own works. The young Hume would have known of Voltaire's remarkable early success with *Oedipe* and the *Henriade*. He may also have been impressed by Voltaire's remarks in *Letters concerning the English Nation* about the 'great veneration' paid to the arts in England, and the more general English veneration for exalted talents, such as ensured 'that a man of merit in their country is always sure of making his fortune'.[71]

One reason why Hume displayed no anxiety about making money from his pen may have been the fact that he was not, in truth, what his age termed 'a writer by trade'. His family may not have been rich, but it could give him an allowance nonetheless, and this meant that he never had to write simply in order to eat. In this important sense he was independent from the very beginning. He did not need a patron, and never sought one.[72] When, in 1748, he sent the third duke of Argyll a copy of his *Essays*, he made sure to be clear that it was a present 'not to the duke of Argyle, but to Archibald Campbell, who is undoubtedly a man of sense and learning'.[73] The only dedication he ever wrote was to his

friend, the minister-turned-playwright John Home. Nor did he ever have to do any journalism or hackwork. There is in this way a very obvious contrast between Hume's life as man of letters and that of his almost exact contemporary, Samuel Johnson, whose early years were full of hardships and compromises the like of which Hume was fortunate enough never to know.[74] The contrast between the beginnings of Hume's and Johnson's careers reveals how easy, really, it was for Hume to turn himself into the man of letters that he wanted to be. His circumstances made him more like Horace Walpole or Gibbon than like Johnson or Henry Fielding.[75] And yet, as Johnson would have been the first to point out, in being Scottish Hume had a disadvantage that neither Johnson nor Fielding had. In his biography of William Robertson, Dugald Stewart observed that in the 1730s, '[t]he trade of authorship was unknown in Scotland'.[76] Scots of Hume's generation, including of course Robertson himself, generally combined the life of letters with a profession. Henry Home of Kames, born in 1696, was already showing how a lawyer could at the same time be a success as an author. There was alternatively the church, as for Robertson, John Home, and Robert Wallace, or a university professorship, as for Thomas Reid, George Campbell, and (for a while) Adam Smith, or a combination of the two, as for Hugh Blair and Adam Ferguson. For Hume, though, the ideal was not to be constrained by professional obligations of any kind. He allowed his name to be put forward for two university chairs, but probably did not really want either of them. Smith, it is worth remembering, gave up his position at Glasgow as soon as he could, in order to give himself the liberty he needed to work on *The Wealth of Nations*.

Hume was able to remain free of all involvement in any of the institutions that, in the aftermath of the 1707 Union of Parliaments, defined Scottish public life. This, one imagines, helped him to think of himself as not only, or even primarily, a Scottish writer but also a British one, and a European one too. Another thing that detached him from Scotland was his lack of interest in the all-important question, as his contemporaries saw it, of how the country might be *improved*. Men like Kames, Robertson, and Archibald Campbell, the third duke of Argyll, were preoccupied by the problem of how Scotland's backwardness, as compared with the state of England, might be remedied.[77] Hume was not. He was not opposed to improvement, needless to say, but he was not prepared to bind himself to the cause. This unconcern with the practical business of changing

Scotland for the better was doubtless another reason why he was not very disappointed by either of his failures to secure a university position. It was not that Hume regarded public office, or the favours of the powerful, as in themselves incompatible with the independence necessary to a man of letters. As he recounted in 'My Own Life', at various times he accepted offers of positions from General James St Clair, from the Earl of Hertford, and from Hertford's brother, General Henry Seymour-Conway. He was, moreover, relentless in trying to secure for himself the pensions that went along with such positions. What he never accepted was a position, or a favour, that might have prevented him from writing as he wanted to write. His idea of himself was as a man of letters unconstrained by any practical demands, whether professional or political, or, for that matter, moral.

One way of characterizing this conception of the life of the man of letters is to call it *philosophical*. Hume's goal as a man of letters was to be free enough to be able to rise above the everyday and the particular and, from that vantage point, to identify and characterize general principles that were otherwise hard, if not impossible, to discern. This is philosophy understood not as a body of doctrine or a subject matter, but rather as a habit of mind, a style of thinking, and of writing, such as could in principle be applied to any subject whatsoever. Such an understanding of philosophy was common in mid-eighteenth-century Britain, when what we now call natural science was still called natural philosophy, and when moral philosophy comprised not only ethics but also what would now be termed psychology, anthropology, political science, and political economy. In his *Dictionary* Johnson gave four definitions of 'philosophy'. The first was, simply, 'Knowledge natural or moral'.[78] Twenty years later, the *Modern Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* defined philosophy as 'the knowledge or study of nature and morality, founded on reason and experience', and divided it into three principal parts: the study of logic and metaphysics; the study of the laws of nature and nations; and the study of bodies animate and inanimate.[79] James Harris, in *Hermes, or a Philosophical Inquiry concerning Universal Grammar*, declared that 'there is no subject, having its foundation in nature, that is below the dignity of a philosophical inquiry'. And philosophical inquiry was characterized by Harris in terms of the development of 'extensive views' and the transition 'from small matters to the greatest'. It was as a philosopher, therefore, that he was interested in a *universal* grammar, in the principles common to all human

languages as such.[80] Similarly, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke depicted the investigation of the springs and the tracing of the courses of the passions as part of a larger search into 'the general scheme of things', in so far as the goal was to reduce the complex to 'utmost simplicity', and thus 'communicate to the taste a sort of philosophical solidity'.[81] To be a philosopher at this time was to approach a subject, any subject, in a careful, analytical, and inductive manner, and to derive from one's inquiries maximally general explanatory principles. Joseph Black was to his contemporaries a philosophical chemist, and James Hutton a philosophical geologist. A philosophical approach to religion yielded central principles common to all faiths, and a philosophical politics, such as that of Montesquieu or Adam Smith, sought the fundamental laws of political life as such. The philosopher did not have a practical agenda. That was implicit in his concern for the general, not the particular. This made philosophical politics look attractively different from the self-seeking squabbling of party political debate. On the other hand, it made philosophical religion look, to some at least, reprehensibly theoretical and 'cold'.

The original title of Hume's reworking of Book I of the *Treatise*, *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*, is suggestive of this kind of understanding of the nature of philosophy. And in that book's first 'essay', Hume went some way towards explaining what he took it to entail. The philosopher's characteristic concern, he wrote there, was with general principles which underlie and explain the particularities of ordinary experience. The philosopher had to detach himself from the commitments of everyday life to pursue such inquiries. The 'turn of mind' of the philosopher 'cannot enter into business and action'. The 'mere philosopher' was depicted as living 'remote from communication with mankind . . . wrapt up in principles and notions equally remote from their comprehension'.[82] Hume's goal was to bridge the gap between 'mere philosophy' and 'the world', but this was always a matter of attempting to disengage the reader as much as possible from their ordinary beliefs and sentiments, rather than of compromising the objectivity of the philosopher. The 1742 essays 'The Epicurean', 'The Stoic', 'The Platonist', and 'The Sceptic', taken together, demanded to be read as, in effect, Hume's explanation of why he did not think of himself as able to continue with moral philosophy's traditional project of emotional therapy and improvement of character, and why, as moral philosopher, he concerned himself with the purely

explanatory task of identifying the factors which determine moral judgement. Hume liked to portray himself an anatomist of the moral life – and as an anatomist also of politics. He made a much more serious attempt than was common at the time to rise above factionalism and to discuss politics with genuine impartiality, in the interests of understanding the deeper forces threatening the much-vaunted constitutional settlement of 1688. And in his writings on commerce, there were none of the usual pleas of books on trade for this or that piece of legislative reform, in the interests of this or that part of the mercantile or manufacturing community. The 'chief business' of both philosophers and politicians, Hume wrote in 'Of Commerce', was 'to regard the general course of things': to 'enlarge their view to those universal propositions, which comprehend under them an infinite number of individuals, and include a whole science in a single theorem'.[83] In his letters to the printer William Strahan, Hume regularly referred to all of the works collected together under the title *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* – including the two *Enquiries*, the *Essays, Moral and Political*, the *Political Discourses*, and the 'Natural History of Religion' – as his 'philosophical pieces' or 'philosophical writings'.[84] He did so because each one was an instance of the application of the philosophical mode of reasoning. Seen in this way, no one of these works was any more 'philosophical' than the rest.

As he began on the *History of Great Britain* that became a *History of England*, Hume told the Abbé le Blanc that 'The philosophical spirit, which I have so much indulg'd in all my writings, finds here ample materials to work upon'.[85] Hume's history writing was meant to be, and was understood by many of his readers to be, philosophical in the same way as the *Essays and Treatises*. History made itself philosophical by shifting focus away from the actions of individual historical agents and towards general principles able to explain long-term and large-scale social, political, economic, and cultural change.[86] Of course the kind of narrative history that Hume wrote, divided up as was usual into the reigns of kings and queens, did not give up completely on describing and explaining the actions of individual agents. Indeed, Hume had something of the novelist's interest in the foibles and weaknesses of particular human beings. His style as a historian was to be constantly alternating between the particular and the general. He wrote in the belief that it was not improper for the teller of the national story every now and then 'to make a pause: and to take a survey of the state of the kingdom, with a regard to government,

manners, finances, arms, trade, learning'. For '[w]here a just notion is not formed of these particulars, history can be little instructive, and often will not be intelligible'.[87] Tobias Smollett applauded Hume's 'attempt to comprehend all the objects of history', not only the transactions of the great but also 'in order to point out the progress of the nation in political, commercial, or literary improvements, the regulations which relate to police, commerce, or the revenue, are minutely observed, and the essays of genius are considered'. In this way, Smollett asserted, Hume had 'involved the reflections of a philosophical historian in the detail of his facts'.[88] Although Hume claimed that he wrote the first volume of his *History* in ignorance of Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV*, it is hard to believe that in his conception of philosophical history he was not to some degree influenced by Voltaire.[89] And Voltaire, for his part, was as laudatory as Smollett was about Hume's achievement in *The History of England*. He welcomed especially the manner in which Hume's tendency to reflection enabled him to break absolutely with the partisanship hitherto endemic to history writing in English. Hume, according to Voltaire, revealed himself to be neither a Parliamentarian nor a Royalist, neither an Anglican nor a Presbyterian. He was, simply, '*un homme équitable*'. He 'speaks of weaknesses, errors, and barbarities, like a doctor speaks of epidemic diseases'.[90]

Many of Hume's early readers, including Smollett, believed that Hume wrote his *History* in imitation of Voltaire. Johnson claimed that 'Hume would never have written History, had not Voltaire written it before him'.[91] Hume, though, had none of Voltaire's reforming zeal, neither in religion nor in politics. Hume did not write, as Voltaire said he did, *pour agir*. It is impossible to imagine Hume taking up a case like that of Jean Calas, or writing a book like Voltaire's *Traité sur la Tolérance*.[92] Hume seems to have been made uncomfortable by the utopian optimism and dogmatic self-assurance of the *philosophes* – which may have been part of the reason why he attempted to give assistance to their bitter critic, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was even more sceptical than Rousseau himself was as to the possibility of a writer's doing anything to change and improve the world in which he lived. His account of human nature, with its subversion of the authority of reason, and its case for belief in general as being a function of feeling not rationality, cast doubt on the very possibility of enlightened reform and improvement. Politics as Hume describes it is determined by 'opinion', and opinion is portrayed

by Hume's philosophical history as shaped, not by argument, but by large-scale and impersonal socio-economic forces.

Hume did not make a serious effort to integrate religion into his philosophical history. Religion and religious people were often portrayed by him as anomalous, and as disruptive of the social and political order. Yet in 'The Natural History of Religion' Hume made it clear that religion, all the same, has the deepest of roots in human nature. It develops out of passions such as fear and hope, which are an integral part of the human constitution. This makes it unsurprising that when Hume imagined a perfect commonwealth, one of the questions that he felt he had to answer concerned the best form of church governance. A central problem of politics, as Hume understood it, was how religion should be managed, and the dangers it poses to stability contained. This suggests that there would be little plausibility to a suggestion to the effect that the remit of the philosophical man of letters, as understood by Hume, was to work towards the demise of the Christian religion. Philosophical reasoning was, of course, to be applied to religion as to everything else. Religion was to be examined from a maximally detached and disengaged point of view. Superstition and enthusiasm were to be shown in their true lights, and moderation cultivated in their place. But there was no reason to believe that philosophy might be able to do anything at all to weaken the hold of religion on the vast majority of people. Also, there was no pressing need, in Britain in the mid-eighteenth century, to desire the extirpation of the Christianity as such. No one was being tortured, as Calas was, to make them confess that they had murdered their son to stop him from converting to a different religion.[93] At home in Edinburgh, Hume enjoyed the company of moderates of the Church of Scotland, and regarded some of them as being among the acutest of his critics.[94]

On his deathbed Hume joked that he might buy some time from Charon by telling him that he wanted to wait, before entering Hades, until the downfall of Christianity. Adam Smith's retelling of the joke in his published account of Hume's death was a provocation to Hume's enemies, but, still, the joke was just a joke. I think that it tells us more about Hume's willingness to exploit his reputation as an atheist to comic effect than about his real intentions as a man of letters. Hume also imagined telling Charon that he had been correcting his works for a new edition and wanted to see how the public received the alterations. This, though also a joke at his own expense, does tell us something about Hume's intentions as a man of letters. It mattered immensely to him that he find the best possible way of

communicating his arguments to the reader. The main problem with the *Treatise* was, Hume thought, its manner, not its matter. He had misjudged what the readers of his day expected in the way of style, and had chosen the wrong form for his theory of human nature. The immense baroque architecture of his first book appeared to repel people rather than attract them, and a completely different mode of presentation was needed if Hume's ideas were to be known and discussed. Formal questions continued to be one of Hume's preoccupations once the rewriting of the *Treatise* was complete. He changed his mind more than once, for example, about how exactly to integrate philosophical reflections into the narrative flow of his history writing. And to judge by his correspondence with Strahan, correctness of language and syntax was an obsession with Hume. He was constantly re-reading his own works, mostly with a view to minute alterations in the choice of words and the structure of sentences. He pressed for new editions of *The History of England* and *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, and very soon after each new edition appeared, he began pressing for another one. To recognise this is to recognise that Hume's career as a man of letters did not come to an end in late 1761, with the completion of the *History*. Correction was as important a part of Hume's literary life as composition was. No book was ever finished. It was always in the process of being improved. There is no sign that Hume found this wearisome. He could have said, as Pope did, that 'I corrected because it was as pleasant to me to correct as to write' – and also that 'I had too much fondness for my productions to judge of them at first, and too much judgment to be pleas'd with them at last'.[95]

Style mattered so much to Hume precisely because, as a man of letters, he did not write as a specialist only for fellow specialists. He sought, and found, a very large readership among the educated men and women of his day, in Britain, and in Europe more widely. What he wanted from his readers, but did not always get, was a willingness to join him in a certain kind of discursive space, in a kind of conversation which, again, might best be called *philosophical*. This kind of conversation was philosophical in its interest in underlying general explanatory principles, but also, and just as importantly, in the impersonality of its tone. It was intolerable to Hume how clumsily some of his readers made connections between his writings and his personal convictions – or lack thereof. In Hume's day, assumptions were all too easily made about the character and life of an author, such that the character and life of the author, rather than his writings considered in themselves, became the object of discussion.

Essential to the kind of conversation that Hume wanted his writings to contribute to was a willingness of all parties to focus only on the ideas and the arguments, without trying to second-guess what someone's intentions might be in putting forward such ideas and such arguments, and what kind of person it might be who could write in this way about that topic. All political and religious commitments were to be put to one side. To one of his critics Hume declared that 'Our connection with each other, as men of letters, is greater than our differences as adhering to different sects or systems'. 'Let us', he continued, 'revive the happy times, when Atticus and Cassius the Epicureans, Cicero the Academic, and Brutus the Stoic, could, all of them, live in unreserved friendship together, and were insensible to all those distinctions, except so far as they furnished matter to discourse and conversation'.[96] Hume wrote these words, perhaps, more in hope than in expectation. He was reminded often how hard even the men of letters among his contemporaries found it to lay aside personal animosities and rivalries. He was told that he was both a Whig and a Tory when he took himself to be neither. He was told that he was an atheist when he believed he had revealed nothing at all in his writings about his personal religious views. He was told he was licentious and a subverter of morality when what he thought he had done was merely to show how morality might better be understood. Sometimes Hume found these things amusing, sometimes he found them deeply offensive. They showed him that the philosophical conversation which he desired to join could not be presumed to be already going on, waiting for him to take his place in it. His task as a man of letters was to be part of the effort to bring that conversation, the conversation that we call the Enlightenment, into existence.[97]

Summary of the Narrative

To see Hume as first and foremost a man of letters, and to see philosophy as having been for him a style of thought and of writing rather than a subject matter or body of doctrine, provides a way of avoiding the dilemma forced upon the intellectual biographer by the two most common approaches to his literary career. It is no longer necessary, on this way of reading Hume, to choose between, on the one hand, the nineteenth-century story according to which he abandoned philosophy for less demanding subjects out of a combination of intellectual laziness and the desire for an easy kind of fame, and, on the other hand, the more recent story according to

which all of his writings are to be seen as continuations and developments of the project adumbrated in the introduction of his first book. We can say instead both that Hume never gave up on philosophy and that there was nothing systematic about the manner in which he chose the topics to which philosophical reasoning would be applied. While it is certainly true that Hume's cast of mind was essentially and unwaveringly *philosophical*, it is also true that he was interested in many things, and that he made no effort to organise those interests and arrange them in order. Thomas Reid's writings, published and unpublished, fit together to form an organised and unified whole.[98] So, arguably, do those of Adam Smith.[99] As I read them, Hume's do not. And so I make no effort in this book to argue that Hume had a system in which all his books have their place. I see his writings as unified only by the analytical intelligence at work in each of them. Also, I see Hume as having been willing to alter his works in light of changes of mind and changes of circumstance. He was not engaged in the business of filling out an intellectual vision in abstraction from the world around him. He was acutely sensitive to the complexities of his time and place, and wrote, and corrected, out of a desire to show how philosophy might illuminate some of the deeper problems faced by the age in which he lived. My goal in this book is to characterize Hume's philosophical treatments of human nature, of politics, of trade, of religion, and of English history, to locate them in their discursive and historical contexts, and to describe – and, where possible, account for – the alterations he went on to make to them.[100]

In Chapter 1 I make some suggestions as to how to understand Hume's intellectual development from when he left college in 1725 to his departure for France in the summer of 1734. What little evidence we have suggests that Hume did not get much out of his university education. If he gained a sense of the importance of experimentalism in natural philosophy from the lectures of Robert Steuart during his final year, that was probably the only thing, apart from Latin and Greek, that he took with him when he left Edinburgh. A short-lived period as a law student might have given the young Hume an interest in the modern natural jurisprudence that was just beginning to exert its influence on the development of moral and political philosophy in Scotland, but Hume's intellectual interests were already many and diverse, and a career in law seemed to him incompatible with following where those interests led. His family let him give up on the law, and appear to have left him free to read as widely as he wished. The first really significant event in Hume's intellectual life may have been an

encounter with Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Hume bought, or was given, a copy in 1726, and his earliest letters give the impression that he spent the next two or three years working very hard to follow Shaftesbury's instructions as to how taste, and character, should be formed. Hume seems to have done his best to turn himself into a kind of Stoic, albeit one of a modern and polite sort. The experiment was not a success. It helped to bring on a physical and mental breakdown in the autumn of 1729, and by the time Hume was on the way to recovery, he had a completely new sense of his intellectual vocation. He no longer shared Shaftesbury's admiration for the moral philosophy of the ancients, and believed that there was a need for a completely fresh start in the study of human nature. There is reason to think that Mandeville and Bayle were important influences on Hume as he formulated this new philosophical project. Hume was in the right frame of mind to respond enthusiastically to their scepticism about the conceptions of human nature with which philosophers had worked hitherto, and to their scepticism about Stoicism, including in Mandeville's case the Stoicism of Shaftesbury, in particular. Cool and realistic descriptions of the power of the passions, especially the power of pride, might well have been to his taste, along with accounts of the impotence of reason. But it is reasonable to suppose also that Hume was attuned to what was going on in Scotland, intellectually speaking, in the early 1730s. This was the beginning of Hutcheson's time as Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow, and Hutcheson was without doubt another powerful influence on Hume's early intellectual development. Out of the tension between Mandeville and Bayle on the one hand and Hutcheson on the other developed key features of the philosophical analysis of human nature that Hume would expound on in his first book.

Hume went to France in the summer of 1734 and stayed there for three years. We know almost nothing about this period of Hume's life other than that by the end of it Hume had a complete draft of Books I and II of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. What he read while writing the *Treatise*, and how his ideas developed, can only be guessed at. In Chapter 2 I concentrate on relating the principal arguments of the *Treatise* to the texts that it is safe to assume were important to Hume as he framed his theory of human nature. Books I and II of the *Treatise* demand to be read as a self-contained whole – as, to use a phrase of Hume's from the Advertisement to the *Treatise*, 'a compleat chain of reasoning'. In Book I a sceptical examination of the nature of human rationality gave rise to a new account of how beliefs

are generated, and regulated, by experience. Hume's scepticism, as I present it, developed out of a long-standing interest in Bayle, but also out a sense of the devastating implications of Berkeley's anti-abstractionism for conventional philosophical models of the faculty of reason. Hume's reconstruction of reason, as I present it, developed out of his Berkeley-inspired insight that Locke had failed to explain how exactly experience can be used as a basis for non-demonstrative reasoning about matters of empirical fact. Many of the materials Hume used in his new account of probabilistic, causal reasoning were taken from Malebranche. Hume did not share Malebranche's interest in the physiological basis of thought, or his obsession with man's post-lapsarian tendency to error. But he did agree with Malebranche about the inability of reason to govern the passions. For Hume, though not for Malebranche, this meant that an account needed to be given of how the passions are able to govern themselves. Book II of the *Treatise* provided such an account, making crucial use of the analysis of pride, or 'self-liking', in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. Once the publication of Books I and II was in progress, Hume returned to Scotland, and to serious work on Book III, 'Of Morals'. I use Hume's correspondence with Hutcheson in 1740 as the basis for a conjecture about the composition of Book III, arguing that parts 2 and 3 were likely written before part 1, and that the distinction between artificial and natural virtues is at the heart of Hume's philosophy of morals. At the end of Chapter 2 I consider the question of what Hume might have attempted in the unwritten books of the *Treatise* on criticism and politics. I suggest that 'Of Criticism' might have born something like the same relation to Hutcheson's work on the sense of beauty as 'Of Morals' bore to his work on the moral sense; and that in 'Of Politics' Hume might have attempted the conjectural history of civil society that would later be explored by Scottish contemporaries such as Smith, Ferguson, and Millar.

Even as he worked on the *Treatise*, Hume continued to read widely, in the classics, and in modern political arithmetic and political economy. I begin Chapter 3 with an assessment of what the so-called Early Memoranda tell us about Hume's intellectual interests at around the time when Book III of the *Treatise* was completed. At this point Hume was already writing essays, and in the rest of the chapter I consider Hume's practice as an essayist in the collections of *Essays, Moral and Political* published in 1741 and 1742. Hume said in the advertisement to the 1741 volume that each of his essays should be considered 'as a work apart', and it is

true that there is no way of giving a unified and systematic account of these two collections of essays taken as a whole. I examine them from four different points of view. First I focus on those essays where Hume clearly has Addison as his model, and suggest that they do not take us very far towards understanding Hume's ambitions as an essay writer. Many of them were dropped from later editions of the *Essays*. Hume's essays on British party politics tell us more, I think, about what he wanted to do with the essay form. They succeeded in presenting in a new light factional disputes that by the early 1740s would have been very familiar to Hume's readers. All writers on politics aspired to 'impartiality', but Hume attains a perspective on political debate that makes it hard to give his arguments a party-political characterization. Even though these essays are highly topical, there are frequent suggestions of an underlying philosophy of politics, and I attempt a schematic characterization of what the essays suggest as to Hume's idea of the form a 'science of politics' should take. I argue that for Hume, as for many British writers in the first half of the eighteenth century, James Harrington was the point of departure for a philosophical analysis of politics. Harrington's theory of property as the basis of power and authority needed to be amended in several crucial ways, however, if it was to accommodate the importance of 'opinion' in politics, and if it was to take account of the political significance of a burgeoning international commerce. Finally I examine the more extended historical explanations of cultural phenomena attempted in the essays 'Of Eloquence' and 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences', and also the argument implicit in the four essays in which Hume 'personates' representatives of major schools of ancient philosophy. These last, I argue, can be understood as an explanation and justification of the purely 'anatomical' philosophical method of the *Treatise*. The *Essays, Moral and Political* reached a wider audience than the *Treatise* did, and their success might well have prompted Hume to reconsider the question of how, under modern conditions, philosophy should be written.

Chapter 4 begins with Hume still at the family home in Chirnside, working on his Greek, continuing to read widely, but, so far as we know, without writing anything intended for publication. At some point in the early 1740s, Hume abandoned the project of the *Treatise*. It would seem that it took him time to decide what to do next. His first move was to try to secure some kind of paid employment. He thought initially of work as a tutor, but then allowed his name to be put forward in the spring of 1745 as a candidate for the soon to be vacant Edinburgh chair of moral

philosophy. He was not a very plausible candidate, and did not get the job, apparently to his own relief. The 'affair at Edinburgh' generated a brief pamphlet defending the *Treatise* and clarifying the nature of its scepticism. This seems to have spurred Hume on to a complete rewrite of Book I of the *Treatise*, to which I then turn. *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* appears to have been begun during time in 1745–6 when Hume was a tutor and companion to the insane Marquess of Annandale. It must have been almost finished before Hume embarked on two years spent mostly abroad in the employment of General James St. Clair. Hume's claim was that the *Philosophical Essays* embodied a change in the 'manner' of his approach to the human understanding but not in the 'matter'. There is no reason to quarrel with this assessment, although it also true that Hume added to the 'matter' by developing the implications of his sceptical account of the understanding for the rational basis of religious belief. The change in 'manner' was dramatic. It suggests a rethink on Hume's part about the expectations of his audience and about how what remained a radical and subversive analysis of the fundamental principles of human cognition might meet those expectations. After this I consider another element of the project of rewriting of the *Treatise*, three new essays on political obligation written in the wake of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745–6. Two of these essays ('Of Passive Obedience' and 'Of the Original Contract') were published in 1748, but the third ('Of the Protestant Succession') was so likely to cause controversy that it was held back, to be published in 1752 in *Political Discourses*. These essays built on the treatment of allegiance in part 2 of Book III of the *Treatise*, and spelled out its implications for Britons in the mid-eighteenth century. At the same time they gave further definition to Hume's conception of how politics was to be made the subject of philosophical examination.

Thanks largely to his time as secretary to St Clair, by 1749 Hume was able to think of himself as having achieved a measure of financial independence. For the next two years he did not bother any more about getting 'fixt in some way of life', as he had put it in a letter to Kames two years earlier. Having returned again to Chirnside, he lived the life of a man of letters to the full, and wrote an extraordinary amount about a wide range of subjects in a very short period of time. Between the spring of 1749 and the summer of 1751 he finished *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* and *Political Discourses*. He also completed a draft of *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. There is some reason to think that in addition he wrote 'The Natural History of Religion', 'Of Tragedy', a

new version of Book II of the *Treatise*'s account of the passions, and what might have been a reformulation of Book I of the *Treatise*'s account of our ideas of space and time. I begin Chapter 5 with an interpretation of the *Enquiry* that emphasizes both the uncompromising character of the moral philosophy it contains and its attention to the question of literary style. I then move on to *Political Discourses*. I set Hume's political economy in its contemporary context, in order to make sense of what exactly Hume's intentions might have been in the one text that he was prepared to admit in 'My Own Life' as having been an immediate and substantial success. Again, style – the manner in which Hume treated a set of topics central to the extant literature on trade – is crucial to understanding what Hume was about here. Very often in *Political Discourses* the core argument of an essay was not Hume's own invention. His goal, usually, was to raise questions and provoke further thought, not definitively to establish a theoretical postulate. It mattered that he was *not* elaborating a systematic theory of commerce, in the manner of Cantillon, Steuart, or Smith. His intention would seem to have been to turn commerce into a subject of reflection and conversation for those who did not themselves have a direct interest in one or other of its branches. In the final section of the chapter I take it as possible, at least, that Hume wrote 'The Natural History of Religion', along with most of the rest of what would be published in 1757 as *Four Dissertations*, during this period. My main concern, however, is to offer a preliminary reading of *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. I suggest that it can be read as a representation of an idealized intellectual community, as a portrayal of the kind of philosophical discussion that Hume wanted to be able to believe was possible in his time and place. I treat some of his correspondence with other philosophical men of letters – including Robert Wallace, George Campbell, Thomas Reid, and Richard Price – as providing evidence of how important it was to Hume that philosophical friendship was possible even between people who disagreed profoundly about speculative questions, and about speculative religious questions in particular.

In 1751, Hume at last left the family home and, with his sister, set up house in Edinburgh. His first move was to issue a collection of all of his writings, apart from the *Treatise* and a handful of his more blatantly Addisonian essays, with the title *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. Having failed to get another university professorship that he probably did not very much want, this time at Glasgow, he was elected Keeper of

the Advocates' Library, and by September 1752 was at work on the first volume of *The History of Great Britain*. In the first half of Chapter 6 I sketch the historiographical context for Hume's history writing. One very important point of reference for Hume the historian was undoubtedly Rapin's *Histoire d'Angleterre* and its modernization of the Whig narrative that had dominated English historical scholarship since the Glorious Revolution. But it would appear that Hume was even more impressed by new developments in Whig history prompted by Bolingbroke's adaptation of Rapin's narrative to Tory ends. Walpole's propagandists responded by adapting Tory history to Whig ends, and Hume's political essays of the 1740s suggest that he, too, believed that the fundamental Whig objective of vindication of the 1688 Revolution was best served by being disconnected from the standard story of how England's ancient constitution had been saved from the evil designs of Stuart tyrants. I also consider the revolution in historical *style* that Hume intended to effect. In the second half of the chapter I proceed to an account of the main lines of argument deployed by Hume in the two volumes of *The History of Great Britain*, published in 1754 and 1757. I argue that it is essential to understanding *The History of Great Britain* that it be read as a whole. For on Hume's reading of seventeenth-century British history, the Civil War achieved nothing. The fundamental constitutional problem that had caused the Civil War – the imbalance between the crown's real power and the beliefs held by James I and Charles I about basis and extent of the royal prerogative – was not solved by the time of the Restoration. The Glorious Revolution as described by Hume was a kind of solution, but one that very well might never have been arrived at. The Revolution was not inevitable, and, Hume ended the *History* by suggesting, the post-1688 constitution represented a complex balancing act that could all too easily be upset. There was more, however, to the *History of Great Britain* than this philosophical analysis of the fundamental dynamics of recent political history. Hume's conception of proper historical style caused him to balance a striving for impartiality with a desire to emotionally engage the reader with the fate of history's victims, both great and small. He wanted the *History of Great Britain* to be both philosophical and 'interesting'.

Having at first intended to take his narrative forward to the accession of George I, Hume decided instead to go backwards, to the Tudor period during which the forces responsible for the disasters of the seventeenth century had begun their disruptive work. Since there had been no such

thing as Great Britain prior to the 1603 Union of Crowns, this required a change of title. Hume was now writing the history of England. This is the principal concern of Chapter 7. But before I consider Hume's accounts of the Tudor and medieval periods, I describe the attempts made by the orthodox Calvinist 'Popular' faction of the Church of Scotland, first to prosecute Hume for blasphemy in 1755–6, and then to prosecute his friend, the playwright John Home, in 1757. I suggest that it was these episodes that prompted Hume to publish 'The Natural History of Religion'. The 'Natural History' can thus be seen as an implicit attack not only on Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim 'superstition' but also on the intolerant fundamentalism of Scottish Calvinists. I then move on to *The History of England, Under the House of Tudor*, begun in early 1757 and published in the spring of 1759. This was a corroboration of the view expressed in both the political essays and *The History of Great Britain* that Tudor England was a more or less absolute monarchy from beginning to end. Elizabeth's reign, which took up the entirety of the second volume, was in other words not the golden age of liberty depicted in standard Whig history. The Tories, and the Walpolean Whigs, had been right to downplay the supposed contrast between the last of the Tudors and the first of the Stuarts. Even as he made this argument, though, Hume sought to disentangle it from its Tory roots, most obviously in his treatment of the still vexed question of Mary Queen of Scots. And he was completely even-handed in his condemnation of the horrors visited upon England by both Catholic and Protestant monarchs in the aftermath of the Reformation. Henry VII's property legislation, and the consequent shift of the balance of power away from the nobility and towards the House of Commons, may have been in a sense the origins of the Glorious Revolution, but the path that led from Henry VII to William and Mary passed through a thicket of historical accidents, ironies, and unintended consequences. The final section of Chapter 6 examines *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Accession of Henry VII*, written in two years between 1759 and 1761. This was Hume's completion of the demolition of Whig history, an account of the medieval period that rested heavily on the Tory histories of Carte and Brady, designed to show that whatever may have been truth about pre-Norman England, the Norman Conquest and the imposition of feudalism changed everything so radically that there was simply no point to invocations of the native liberties of the Anglo-Saxons. In 1762, Hume assembled all of his history writing under the title of *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in*

1688. The book's overall argument was that there was, properly speaking, no such thing as *the* English constitution. Instead there had been a series of quite different constitutions, each of which had changed and mutated into the next. There was, therefore, no privileged historical moment in relation to which the present could be measured and either celebrated or found wanting. History could no longer be a weapon for political parties to use against each other.

The History of England made Hume rich. It also left him unsure what to do next. His publisher wanted him to return to the original plan of moving forward from 1688 into the early eighteenth century. There was also the idea of writing a history of the Christian church. Hume confessed to having little appetite for the controversies that both of these projects would certainly involve him in, and instead accepted the invitation of the British ambassador in Paris, the earl of Hertford, to become his Secretary. Hume's time in Paris between September 1763 and January 1766 is my first subject in Chapter 8. Hume got to know many of the greatest figures of the French Enlightenment, but he was not prompted as a result to write anything new. The small amount of evidence that survives suggests that he was not wholly comfortable among the *philosophes*, which may be why when he left Paris, he did so in the company of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, intending to help Rousseau to secure sanctuary and a royal pension in England. As might have been predicted, things with Rousseau did not go smoothly, and the friendship fell apart in a very public way. I then describe the two years Hume then spent in London, first as Deputy Secretary of State in the Northern Department under the Earl of Hertford's brother. Hume witnessed the Wilkite riots of 1768, and first-hand experience of the London mob prompted further reflection on the dangers inherent in a failure to achieve the right constitutional balance between liberty and authority. A jaundiced view of the way British politics was developing in the second half of the eighteenth century was made more pessimistic still by the developing conflict with the thirteen colonies in America. In August 1769, Hume returned to Edinburgh for good. The last section of Chapter 8 describes his final years. Hume was more amused than anything else by James Beattie's attack on him in the *Essay on Truth*. He could dismiss James Macpherson's Ossian poems as fakes without any of Johnson's moral outrage. He was at home among friends, and he was confident of the general superiority of Scottish letters to English. At the end of his life, Hume returned to the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, and put finishing touches on his case for the claim that the difference between

theism and atheism is 'merely verbal'. Right up until the end he was also still engaged on the endless project, with which he had been constantly occupied even while in Paris and in London, of perfecting and improving the *Essays and Treatises* and the *History of England*.

At the end of 'My Own Life' Hume wrote that he saw 'many symptoms of my literary reputation's breaking out at last with additional lustre'.[101] The history of his writings had, as he recounted it, been up until now one of continual failure and disappointment. Only one of his works, the *Political Discourses*, had been successful on first publication. The rest had been either overlooked and neglected, or met with cries of reproach, disapprobation, and even detestation. As cannot but be suggested by the other story told in 'My Own Life' – the story of Hume's progress from poverty to opulence – there was a considerable amount of exaggeration in this narrative of neglect and misunderstanding. Not even the *Treatise* was the disaster that Hume claimed it was in 'My Own Life'. Most of his books met with the kind of reception most writers of the time would only dream about. Hume was read by everyone, was argued with vigorously by many of the greatest writers of his day, and was usually admired even by those who disagreed with him. In this respect 'My Own Life' has sometimes been taken too seriously.[102] It has helped to create the almost entirely misleading image of Hume as a long-suffering victim of intolerance, denied the success he deserved by an oppressive and bigoted religious and political establishment. In another respect, though, 'My Own Life' has usually not been taken seriously enough. Hume's presentation of himself as first and foremost a man of letters is the key to understanding his career as a writer. This is not to say, with his nineteenth-century critics, that after giving up on the *Treatise* he was overtaken by a dishonourable desire for success at any price. In 'My Own Life' Hume portrayed himself as a man of letters of a particular kind, neglectful, as he puts it, of 'present power, interest, and authority, and the cry of popular prejudices'.[103] Distancing himself from these things, he pursued his numerous interests from a position at a remove from everyday life, intent on identifying the general principles at work beneath surface-level particularity and confusion – and intent also on describing those principles in as elegant and correct a prose as it was possible for him to craft.