

Mark G. Spencer (ed.)

David Hume. Historical Thinker, Historical Writer.

Pennsylvania State University Press 2013.

296 pages

\$69.95 (Hardback ISBN 9780271061542)

Any book-length presentation of David Hume as a historian faces the difficulty of entering a vast battleground that is relatively barren. *History of England* was a complex undertaking that occupied a great part of Hume's productive life. Yet, in Hume scholarship the division is still between Hume the Philosopher and Hume the Historian; the first is often considered to be the one of relevance. There have been significant attempts to change this, but it has been nearly 40 years since the publication of Duncan Forbes's magisterial *Hume's philosophical politics*, more than 30 years since Nicholas Phillipson's important *Hume* and 30 years since Donald Livingston's *Hume's philosophy of common life*. A growing number of eighteenth-century scholars are waiting for a balanced, state of the art, multi-authored volume explaining the relevance and meaning of David Hume's *History of England* (especially its philosophical relevance). Such volume would need to balance Forbes and Phillipson's overtly secular and pointed readings that had their main emphases on the Stuart volumes and Livingston's exaggerated ideas about liberty in Hume's *History*. Unfortunately, the wait isn't over after the publication of *David Hume. Historical thinker, historical writer*.

Mark Spencer has taken as his task as an editor to improve our understanding of Hume's historical writings. The volume manages to do this. The publisher calls it 'a transdisciplinary collection,' which argues that Hume's 'historical and philosophical works are more intimately connected than scholars have often assumed.' There are many contexts to these collected essays, but rather scarce coherence between them and insufficient account of how Hume's historical and philosophical works are actually linked. The dual nature of the volume is that most of the essays are good and useful in their own way and in their particular contexts. If there was an actual genre of studying Hume's philosophical history, the random nature of the volume would be justified. But this is not the case and the inconsistency between the pieces plays as an out of tune melody.

Spencer has faced a difficult undertaking as an editor. The main problem lies with what he has inherited from the former generation of Hume scholars who have taken *History of England* seriously. The predicament is that no recent, balanced account of Hume's life has been given in which Hume's philosophy and history have been coupled. This was a task for Roger Emerson and some of the other distinguished Hume scholars to complete, but it did not materialize and it has since been passed down a generation to James Harris.

Spencer identifies an excellent point of departure in his introduction, when he writes that 'it is not just that it is wrongheaded to pigeonhole Hume as "philosopher" at one point in his literary career and as "historian" at another; history and philosophy are commensurate in Hume's thought and works from the beginning to the end. Only by recognizing this can we begin to make sense of Hume's canon as a whole' (2). But not much comes out of this, partly because Roger Emerson's piece opens the volume. Emerson is using his lot to publish an essay speculating on the question of Hume's thinking about writing ecclesiastical history and what it might have looked like. This is a piece that was probably meant as part of Emerson's extended discussion on Hume that is now

published as separate articles in various different places. Hume on ecclesiastical history is an interesting speculation based on sound research and crucial context illuminating the relevance of Charles Mackie at the University of Edinburgh. Yet, it is out of place as an opening piece of a published volume on Hume's *History*, which is a rare occasion compared to the amount of material that publishers are rearing on Hume on philosophical subjects.

One of the highlights in the volume is the essay by Fritz van Holthoon, who has proved himself one of the more advanced scholars on Hume's *History*. He gives us an overall reading of *History*, focusing on the role of political philosophy and how this relates to Hume's political thinking in general. Van Holthoon sensibly considers what kind of political impact Hume wanted to have on his audience. The essay's virtue is that it puts forward an original argument about the nature of Hume's *History*, managing to take a stance on Hume as a historical thinker and writer and commenting also on other interpretations in Spencer's volume. It is about how to read *History*, an informed manual-like account; the type that is needed when the current state of scholarship is taken into consideration. Holthoon understands that Hume's *History* was not written as a uniform project of *History of England*, but its different contexts require interpretation. Holthoon works with a broad brush and some claims are a little loose, but his analysis of the relationship between Hume's political program and *History* is something for others to emulate in the future.

Some other essays that one would expect to see in a volume like this are Jeffrey Suderman on medieval kingship and governance and Timothy Costelloe on the role of memory and imagination in Hume's approach to history and literature. Both of these essays manage to illuminate Hume as a historical writer, Suderman regarding Hume's political thought and Costelloe carefully outlining the relationship between literary criticism and historical writing. Douglas Long's essay on Hume's historiographical imagination overlaps with Costelloe, particularly elaborating on Adam Smith, but perhaps tries to accomplish too much within a limited space.

A particular strength of the volume is that the role of reception and readership of Hume's *History* is brought out carefully in two essays by Mark Towsay and David Allan. The relevance of Hume's *History* as a pedagogical text of the Georgian period becomes crystal clear. In Allan's piece, the question of female readers is also brought to the surface and libraries in provinces get their fair share of attention. Readership is important and interesting, but what would have needed to be answered first to gain some analytic force is the actual substance of *History*. How was it written? And why? How does it relate to the other numerous British historical accounts at the time? This complex story needs to be told in order to understand the text. It is largely missing in the volume.

Of the other collected essays, Jennifer Herdt continues her efforts to underline a normative reading of Hume and the relevance of sympathy in all of Hume's works. There is a slight North American bias in the volume and it is quite telling that Herdt's piece turns into an analysis of Livingston's account of Hume's *History*. At the same time, her division between natural and artificial lives and their relevance in Hume is important.

Claudia Schmidt, who died before the proofing stage of this volume, spent a lot of time studying Hume's philosophy of history. The categorization of *History* is a very difficult - if not impossible - task. The case Schmidt provides for Hume's influence in the philosophy of history is interesting, although not entirely convincing. She attempts to cover a lot of ground and leaves us perhaps with more perplexing questions than answers.

On political philosophy, although schematic, Philip Hicks's short paper about the context for Hume's use of 'the spirit of liberty' might be useful, if 'spirit of liberty' was a key explanatory device in *History of England*. But it isn't. There is not a single historical author in the eighteenth century who stood more in contrast with Hume's understanding of history and liberty than Catherine Macaulay.

The closing piece of the volume is by Mark Box and Michael Silverthorne on populousness of ancient nations. With coherence in mind, the book could have opened with an account on this topic. This essay makes an extremely important point, because the ancient vs. modern debate is a core element of Hume's historical thinking. One could go as far as claiming that this is where Hume's *History* begins. This is a useful piece for scholars interested in *History*. More space could have been devoted to building an account that would link to the other essays in the book. What is offered is a close textual study of Hume's essay without a wider context of Robert Wallace and other eighteenth-century thinkers that would substantiate the reading and explain how Hume's historical thinking actually evolves. But Box and Silverthorne's essay is certainly something for others to build on.

Penn State Press should be complimented for undertaking the important job of publishing on Hume's *History* (previously they have published, for example, Schmidt's *David Hume: Reason in History*). Many of the individual essays in Spencer's collection are interesting and useful in their own contexts, but in order to grasp how Hume's historical and philosophical works are connected, much more rigor and austerity is needed from those who seriously work on the Hume that wrote *History*, also, in order to engage the uninitiated.

Mikko Tolonen

University of Helsinki