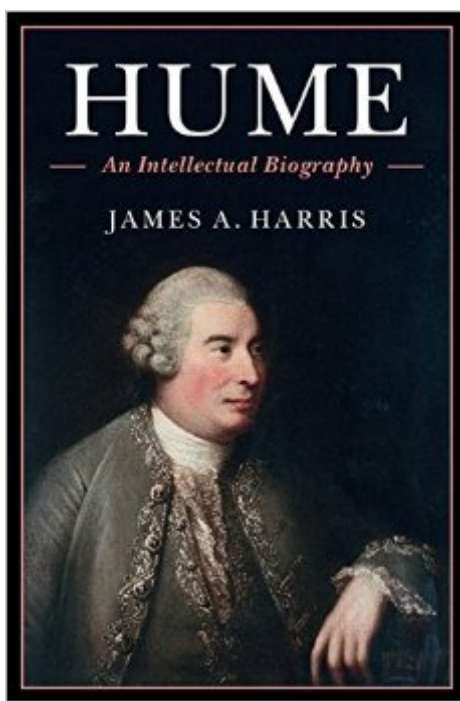


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Hume: An Intellectual Biography



Synopsis

This is the first book to provide a comprehensive overview of the entire career of one of Britain's greatest men of letters. It sets in biographical and historical context all of Hume's works, from *A Treatise of Human Nature* to *The History of England*, bringing to light the major influences on the course of Hume's intellectual development, and paying careful attention to the differences between the wide variety of literary genres with which Hume experimented. The major events in Hume's life are fully described, but the main focus is on Hume's intentions as a philosophical analyst of human nature, politics, commerce, English history, and religion. Careful attention is paid to Hume's intellectual relations with his contemporaries. The goal is to reveal Hume as a man intensely concerned with the realization of an ideal of open-minded, objective, rigorous, dispassionate dialogue about all the principal questions faced by his age.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is the first major biography of Hume in a long time. The prior standard biography by EC Mossner was published initially in the 1950s and revised modestly in the 1970s. Mossner's enjoyable book focused on Hume's personal life and what might be termed his professional success as a literary figure. Harris' focus is quite different. This is a description and analysis of Hume's work with minimal, though effective narrative, of his personal. Harris works through all of Hume's work, starting with the great *Treatise*, and finishing with his major historical works. Harris stresses some major themes. One is Hume's consistent pursuit of literary fame, though literature in this context includes his philosophical and historical work. This contained a large element of desire to make a

substantial contribution to human improvement through careful reasoning and analysis. Another component was Hume's desire to participate in the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment. A second is his empiricism; the insistence on impartial evaluation of things as they actually are. Hume's naturalism and search for underlying structural principles is also a major theme of all his work. Particularly good features of this book are Harris's attention to the historical works and essays that are often neglected by many readers. Harris is also very good on the relationship of the ideas presented in the Treatise and Hume's subsequent writings. Harris does well in discussing the context of Hume's work, particularly the Scottish context, and some of Hume's important antecedents. One surprising point for me was Harris' emphasis on the importance of Mandeville's work. This is a well written and thoughtful book. Harris' discussions of Hume's works are judicious and presented clearly.

Writing a proper biography of an intellectual subject presents the author of history with a difficult task. When your subject is a writer, or, worse yet, a philosopher, reflecting on the relationship between their thinking and their personal experiences in a way that is both entertaining and insightful can oftentimes be a challenge greater than the abilities of many, even very serious scholars. The problem is very frequently a consequence of confusion about what counts as proper 'experience'. Hume, in many ways, lived a relatively boring life, at least externally speaking. He never seemed particularly interested in getting himself, or remaining 'fix'd' in some stable way of life. He worked few jobs, held only a handful of secretarial posts, and often spent many years at a time sequestered at his family estate in Ninewells reading. This is not a life of swashbuckling adventure or political intrigue, it is the life of someone who spent most of their time reading, thinking or writing. Tempting as it though may be, the philosopher does not always present himself as the most promising candidate for psychoanalytical investigation, in fact, in the case of Hume, little of his personal correspondence or private writing survives from which to draw any singular conclusions regarding, say, the impact of childhood trauma on his development as a thinker. The success of "Hume: An Intellectual Biography" probably derives from Harris' relative disinterest in pursuing a purely psychological or biographically speculative account of his subject. He does not attempt to reconstruct Hume's thought from the purely physical circumstances of his life, such as his upbringing, his education, his profession, or his personal experiences.

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