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## The James Willard Oliver Collection of David Hume & Eighteenth-Century Philosophy

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**THE JAMES WILLARD OLIVER COLLECTION OF DAVID HUME  
& EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHY AT THOMAS COOPER LIBRARY**

**Patrick Scott**

Library collections are the physical evidence of intellectual history, and they tell this history as much through their gaps as through the books they preserve. The recognition of David Hume as the central philosopher of the Scottish enlightenment, and the recognition of his first book, *The Treatise of Human Knowledge* (1739), as a major text for Western thought, emerged very slowly. For more than a century after Hume's death, for many college libraries, Hume was present as historian and essayist, but largely absent as philosopher or religious sceptic, glimpsed only darkly through the refutations of more orthodox writers. The antebellum library of South Carolina College, founded in 1801, and soon growing into one of the largest academic libraries of the day in the United States, faithfully reflected this general picture. But the gap has recently been filled, through the personal collecting initiative and generosity of the former chair of the philosophy department, the late Professor James Willard Oliver. The Oliver Collection, transferred to Thomas Cooper Library's housed in the Department of Rare Books & Special Collections in 1998, brought good copies of nearly all the Hume first editions that the antebellum library had lacked, along with remarkably complete holdings of the early Hume biographies, correspondence and other scholarship.

James Willard Oliver (1912-2001) was born in Missouri. He did his undergraduate work at the University of Florida in the early 1930s. During World War II he fought in North Africa

and Italy, with the Fifth Army under General Mark Clark, earning a Purple Heart at Bizerta and reaching the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Subsequently, at Harvard, he studied epistemology with W. V. Quine, and served as one of Quine's teaching fellows for his undergraduate course in symbolic logic. Among the materials Dr. Oliver later donated to Thomas Cooper Library were early mimeoed versions of Quine's influential textbook on modern logic, together with signed offprints and correspondence.

On completing his Harvard PhD, in 1949, Dr. Oliver returned to the University of Florida. There he developed rigorous courses in the new logic and also founded an extra-curricular Philosophy Club (which began by studying another of his philosopher-heroes, Bertrand Russell; his extensive Russell collection is now also at Thomas Cooper). Dr. Oliver's interests in epistemology and logic led to consulting work with the RAND Corporation and Litton Industries, and in 1959 he moved to Los Angeles, teaching at the University of Southern California from 1960 until 1964, when he was appointed professor and chair of the University of South Carolina's newly-formed Department of Philosophy. He remained at USC till his retirement in 1977.

There had always been some philosophy teaching at South Carolina. In the antebellum college, as in most American colleges of the period, the dominant tradition had been that of the Scottish common sense school--George Campbell and Dugald Stewart. One of the longest-serving professors, Robert Henry, was an Edinburgh graduate, but like many of the others, he was also a clergyman. Two of the early professors, the Englishman Thomas Cooper and the German Francis Lieber, might have been expected to introduce alternatives to the Common Sense textbooks, and at least one of Cooper's star students, James Henley Thornwell, himself later a professor and president at the college, went north after graduation and had tackled Kant. But the

textbooks and curriculum changed very little before 1860. Though there was some drill in traditional logic at the sophomore level, the more advanced philosophy teaching in the senior class evaded Hume himself, focusing on traditional common sense issues of moral judgment and literary taste.

After the civil war, except for the brief reconstruction-era professorship of the Harvard-trained Richard Greener, philosophy teaching at South Carolina was delegated to the college chaplain as professor of “mental and moral science,” a field that apparently left enough spare time to teach a course in English as well. By the time a non-clerical professor was first appointed, in the 1890's, the unitary classical curriculum of the antebellum college had yielded to specialized majors, and historical philosophy was subordinated to more modern career-oriented service teaching, especially for the booming programs in teacher education. In 1911, what had been the philosophy chair passed to Professor Josiah Morse, whose interests lay primarily in psychology. [? The 40's and 50's after Morse's retirement].

The library's book purchases reflected these developments, providing a much better record of Hume's actual influence in American colleges than could be constructed from the formal bibliography of his works. The first printed library catalogue from 1807 has Hume's *History of England*, in 8 volumes, and a two volume edition of his *Essays*. The second catalogue, in 1819, adds the expanded 13-volume Hume-Smollett version of the History, but has apparently deacquired the *Essays*. It was a gap never made up. In the early twentieth-century, and in the Depression, when many American universities and private collectors were building enviable collections of eighteenth-century books, the South Carolina library, in the field of philosophy, at least, was struggling to provide enough reprints of John Dewey. The focus in earlier materials

was in acquisitions of manuscripts and books for the separate South Caroliniana Library, founded in 1940. Moreover, new expectations in library management meant that many non-South Carolina-related eighteenth-century books from the antebellum library were now in open stacks. The majority of non-South Carolina titles from important gift collections (the Abney Coollection, donated 1920; the library of Charles Pinckney, donated by Bernard Baruch in 1934; the J. Rion McKissick Collection, bequeathed in 1944) simply disappeared into the circulating collection. Even in the 1970's and early 80's, books with the ownership signature of Charles Pinckney, author of the Pinckney Draught of the U.S. Constitution, were still being retrieved from the open stacks.

When Dr. Oliver arrived in Columbia, to found a new department, therefore, he faced, in library terms, a daunting task. He did much of the necessary library ordering himself. Certainly in terms of modern philosophy, the philosophy of Whitehead, Russell, Wittgenstein, or Quine, he had a big backlog to make up. Funds were needed for journal subscriptions. His small faculty were intent on developing the undergraduate philosophy major, and acquisitions reflected this. Though Dr. Oliver served on and even chaired the University's Library Committee, he was not by temperament someone who would exploit such leverage. Building a rare book collection for philosophy necessarily took low priority.

But he was himself a book collector. He began quite serious book collecting while at Harvard in the nineteen-forties. His distinguished student, the Bertrand Russell scholar John Slater, later chair of the Philosophy Department at Toronto, recalls Dr. Oliver showing him as an undergraduate at Florida in the early 50's, his first edition of Hume's *Treatise* and encouraging him to begin his own career as a book-collector. By the time Dr. Oliver came to South Carolina he had built up quite serious collections, not only for Hume, but also for Bertrand Russell and

modern logic. He was a serious collector, with marked-up copies of the relevant scholarly bibliographies, but he built and retained the books as working scholarly collections, and continued to add to them well into his retirement. In the late 1990's, with the support of Mrs. Oliver and their son Walt, he negotiated a gift-purchase agreement on terms very favorable to the library, and all three collections are now at Thomas Cooper Library, timely acquisitions when the University has recently initiated a PhD program in philosophy. Dr. Oliver first approached me about transfer of the Hume Collection itself in late 1996, details were agreed and approved by the then Vice-Provost Dr. Terry in July 1997, and a formal announcement and exhibition were held in December that year.

The cornerstone of the Oliver Collection is the first edition of David Hume's first book, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). It is a notable occasion for any library when it can add a volume listed in the great catalogue of publishing landmarks, *Printing and the Mind of Man*; over the years, Thomas Cooper Library has inherited or acquired a significant number of the titles from that list, but in 1997 the addition of Hume's *Treatise*, less than a year after another donor Dr. Irvin gave us another much-sought-after *PMM* title, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and quite soon after Dr. Roy had donated his Kilmarnock Burns, seemed a welcome endorsement of the library's efforts at serious collection-building.

The *Treatise* was originally published as a self-contained two-volume work, discussing the understanding and the passions, and printed in an edition of 1000 copies. In his autobiography, Hume stated that the work "fell dead-born from the press." It was, however, influential enough in this original form to attract the attention of both Thomas Reid (in Aberdeen) and Adam Smith (then in Oxford, where the college authorities reprimanded him and took the book away). While

he was in California in the early 60's, Dr. Oliver had his copy of the *Treatise* rebound in modern calf, so the textblock itself is perhaps better preserved than in many copies retaining their original bindings, but equally no provenance information survives from endpaper inscriptions or bookplates.

The following year, 1740, Hume published what was labeled a third volume to the *Treatise*. This unheralded addition took up a new topic, the problems of moral knowledge, and it was issued from a different publisher. It is likely that the print-run was small, and that relatively few original purchasers of the 1739 two-volume work picked up on publication of the addition. When Hume himself reworked the *Treatise* a decade later, he correctly decided to present the 1739 volumes and the 1740 addition as two distinct and separately-titled works. My former Edinburgh colleague, the Hume scholar and book-dealer John Price, estimates that at least twenty institutional libraries who own the 1739 work, not to mention private collectors, are now in the market for 1740; Dr. Oliver never located a copy, so Thomas Cooper Library is now among the hunters. But the Oliver Collection does include the full text of the original three-volume *Treatise* in the second edition, published in 1817.

It was in the late 1740's, following the recognition given to his more informally-presented essays, that Hume reworked the *Treatise*, into two distinct titles. The Oliver collection has both these reworkings. First came Hume's *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (1748). For this book Hume moved to the London-based Scottish publisher Andrew Millar. Subsequently, Hume repackaged this work again, under the more familiar title *A Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Three years later, Hume similarly reworked the 1740 addition, under the title *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).

Hume, however, first made his mark not so much as a philosopher but as an essayist. Among philosophers, the range of Hume's writing has not perhaps always been fully recognized, but Dr. Oliver acquired first editions of these writings. Hume's first book of informal essays, *Essays, Moral and Political* (1741), was also his first publishing success; the topics included literary taste, the principles of government and liberty, the study of history, superstition and (shown here) "the dignity of human nature." Similar in physical format is the volume of Hume's political essays, issued as volume IV of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, third edition (1754), which includes essays on commerce, money, interest, credit, and population. The whole question of the relation between the separate issues of these works, and their issue also as numbered volumes in the *Essays and Treatises*, is complex. Dr. Oliver's interest was in having a copy of each revision stage for the texts, rather than all the issues, and he largely succeeded in this goal. For such rare separately-published pamphlets as Hume's *Abstract of the Treatise* (1740), *Letter from a Gentleman* (1745), and the recently-attributed political satire *Sister Peg* (1760), the Oliver Collection thus far relies on the modern scholarly reprints by Mossner, Price and others.

As the gaps in the South Carolina College library attest, Hume's contemporary reputation was greatly affected by fear of his sceptical religious views. The Oliver Collection included a nice copy of Hume's *Four Dissertations* (1757), which cover both religion and the problems of literary taste that occupied such other Scots *literati* as Adam Smith, Henry Home, Lord Kames, and Hugh Blair. Very soon after the collection was transferred to the library, we acquired also Hume's posthumously-published *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, in the second edition (1779).

Much the most popular of Hume's works in his own time was his multivolume *History of England*, published in segments from 1754 to 1762, starting with the seventeenth century



volumes, and then adding the earlier periods. Unlike Hume's philosophical and religious writings, his historical ones were purchased for the original South Carolina College library, and in this area the Oliver Collection complements existing holdings. The library has a nice set of the first editions, and the Oliver Collection added the eight-volume set published in 1763, in a fine contemporary binding.

The reputation of Hume's *History* as a standard work is attested by its frequent reprinting. Thomas Cooper Library also has a run of the most sumptuous of these reprints, a remarkable material testimony to the work's cultural standing. Originally projected by the publisher Bowyer as early as 1796, the massive illustrated edition of Hume's *History* was finally published in 70 parts (10 volumes), with the date 1806; Thomas Cooper Library's copy has the plates bound up as a separate eleventh volume. On the face of it, such posthumous repackagings are not evidence about Hume, but in fact the sheer melodrama of these huge early-19th century illustrations points intriguingly to the deeper structures of political psychology that underlie Hume's historical writing and link the ostensibly-philosophic history of the Scottish enlightenment to the romantic historiography of Walter Scott.

This point, about the significance for research collections of later editions and of apparently secondary material in documenting the changing cultural impact of an author or work, was pivotal to the library's agreement with Dr. Oliver that the whole of his Hume Collection, older and more recent works alike, should be preserved together as a special collection, rather than dividing it with the first editions in Rare Books and the modern materials in the stacks. Given time, modern editions become rare books. In the stacks, good books get used, and books that get used get used up. For the Oliver Collection, as for the G. Ross Roy Collection and other

major new donations, we happy to agree that the materials should be preserved as a whole.

Of course, some of the secondary material in the Oliver Collection is already quite rare. Among important 19th century titles are Thomas Murray's *Letters of David Hume* (1841), John Hill Burton's *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, 2 vols. (1846), and Hill Burton's *Letters of Eminent Persons addressed to David Hume* (1849). The Oliver Collection also brought archival copies of all the modern Hume letters and biographies. Along with formal editions, Professor Oliver's files preserve such elusive ephemera as the Christie's auction catalogue relating to a Hume letter that had escaped Mossner's notice.

Whatever its shortcomings in acquiring Hume himself, the antebellum college library, with more recent eighteenth-century Scottish acquisitions, sets the context for Hume and illustrates the extent to which Hume set the agenda for later Scottish philosophy. Examples are the editions of George Campbell's *Essay on Miracles* (a 1797 edition, from the College library); Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (orig. 1764) and his *Essay on the Active Powers* (1788, from the library of Charles Pinckney, author of the Pinckney Draught of the Constitution); and Thomas Brown's *Observations on the nature and tendency of the doctrine of Mr. Hume*, 2nd edition (1806) and Brown's *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (an early American reprint, Hallowell, Maine: 1831). Items documenting Hume's influence from Dr. Oliver's own donations include a fine first edition of John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic*, 2 vols (1843), previously in the Gladstone Memorial Library at St. Deiniol's, and Thomas Huxley's late Victorian account of Hume for the English Men of Letters Series, which gives special prominence to Hume's discussions about animals, an interesting cross-connection to the library's very distinguished C. Warren Irvin, Jr., Collection of Charles Darwin & Darwiniana, donated in 1996. The Oliver

Collection's holdings from modern Hume scholarship include items like these from the 1940s, often bearing an inscription with the date of original purchase in the nineteen-forties. The material relating to the 250th anniversary of Hume's birth includes both versions of the characteristically-combative commemorative address by the modern Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid, providing a second cross-link, this time to the MacDiarmid holdings in the library's G. Ross Roy Collection.

Professor Oliver continued to donate additional materials up till his death in 2001, most notably a fine two-volume quarto of Berkeley's *Works* (London, 1784, the first collected edition). Since 1998, the library has been fortunate in being able to find and add several further early editions of Hume: the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (mentioned above), the true first edition of the *Expose Succinct* on the notorious Hume-Rousseau quarrel (London, 1767), and a nice set of Hume's collected essays (Edinburgh, 1753), filling out the record of the way the sheets from earlier printings of Hume's essays were reissued in the 50's, not only with new title-pages, but with cancels within the text. Following Dr. Oliver's death, memorial gifts from some of his friends and colleagues supported purchase of a first edition of Hume's brief autobiography, published after Hume's death with a memoir by Adam Smith.

The James Willard Oliver Collection of David Hume is a major and welcome addition to the teaching and research opportunities at the University of South Carolina. It represents a notable instance of an individual scholar-collector building up over the years a collection that instantly eclipses the normal day-to-day acquisitions activity of even a well-funded library, outflanking the cultural blindnesses and curricular pressures that necessarily impact institutional activity. David Hume himself was a librarian, for the Advocate's Library in Edinburgh, perhaps the most distinguished scholar-librarian ever, and even he had trouble with the Curators,

his employers, over his acquisition decisions. Individual scholar-collectors can achieve things that libraries often cannot or do not do. Of course, it helps, like Dr. Oliver, to start early, and longevity helps too. The wise librarian wishes all his book-collecting colleagues a long life and many years of collecting enjoyment. But libraries can count themselves extremely fortunate when, after a lifetime of collecting, the individual collector takes steps in time to ensure the survival and the preservation intact of the collection he or she has built. It is not a piece of good fortune to be underestimated or taken for granted.