

1989

A Poem by Philocalos Celebrating Hume's Return to Edinburgh

Donald Livingston

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Livingston, Donald (1989) "A Poem by Philocalos Celebrating Hume's Return to Edinburgh," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol24/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Donald Livingston

**A Poem by Philocalos Celebrating
Hume's Return to Edinburgh**



David Hume left Edinburgh in 1763 to serve as secretary to the Embassy in France under Lord Hertford. For two years he enjoyed the adulation of French society for his achievements in philosophy and history. He returned to London January, 1766, and spent a year tangled in the Rousseau affair. Early in 1767 he took the position of Under-Secretary of State to the Northern Department, which he held until January 1768. He remained in London for nineteen more months where he saw the beginning of the Wilkes and Liberty riots, which lasted on and off for three years and seemed to threaten the rule of law. It is during this time that Hume's letters begin to take on a prophetic note of alarm about the stability of British constitutional order, and how English political fanaticism and the massive public debt, brought on by Pitt's mercantile wars, may bring on political chaos. This theme runs throughout the letters until his death August 25, 1776. Hume wrote William Robertson in November, 1768, about his disgust with English political fanaticism: "I think every day more seriously of retiring to Edinburgh for life. Every Event here fills me with Indignation, which I cannot command and care not to conceal..." (L,

II, 186).¹ By August, 1769, Hume was in Edinburgh "done with all Ambition" and resolved to reside there (as he did) for the rest of his life.

The Scottish Enlightenment was not a politically revolutionary movement like that of the French. It was an Enlightenment of evolutionary reform and so was politically conservative. Hume's pro-government response to the challenge posed by Wilkes, Pitt, the Whig Opposition, and the City of London was shared by the Edinburgh *literati*. And so it is of some interest that on September 6, 1769, a poem was published in *The Caledonian Mercury*, under the pseudonym of Philocalos, welcoming Hume back to the "British Athens" after a six year's absence. Philocalos shares Hume's disgust with English political factionalism, is conscious of Edinburgh's literary achievements, and glories in Hume as her symbol. Hume's European stature reflects the mother city's greatness. The poem looks from the remote north, ignoring England, to the culture of Europe. It is frugal, provincial Edinburgh, not factious and monied London, that is the bearer of the cosmopolitan.

The poem could have been written by any one of Hume's literary friends in Edinburgh. Adam Ferguson, William Robertson, Alexander Carlyle, Hugh Blair, and John Home come to mind as candidates. I would suggest (with some diffidence, however) that the poem was written by Hume's cousin John Home, clergyman, playwright, and author of the tragedy *Douglas*. The warmth, intimacy, exaggerated praise, and effusive character of the whole all point to Home. Alexander Carlyle, another clerical friend of Hume's, says of Home that "he had so much sprightliness and vivacity, and such an expression of benevolence in his manner, and such an unceasing flattery of those he liked (and he never kept company with anybody else)—the kind commendations of a lover, not the adulation of a sycophant—that he was truly irresistible, and his entry to a company was like opening a window and letting the sun into a dark room."² Home accompanied and cheered Hume on the trip to Bath taken in the last months of his life in a vain attempt to restore his health.

Late in life John Home wrote a character of Hume which contains the loyal and fulsome praise of the poem. Home thought Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* could well be "the most original work which the world ever

¹*The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1969). Abbreviated as 'L'.

²*The Autobiography of Dr. Alexander Carlyle of Inveresk 1722-1805*, ed. J. H. Burton (London and Edinburgh, 1910), p. 233.

saw."³ The essay "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" contains more "sound philosophy than all that has been written upon that subject by others."⁴ Home compares Hume favorably to Aristotle. Both were great philosophers whose minds ranged over the whole of culture, and both were men of the world. But Hume was a great historian, and, in the end, "even Aristotle is unequal for he was void of elegance as a writer, and if we mistake not wanted taste: for the taste which he discovers is that which arises from reason and reflection, not that which flows from an internal Sense."⁵ This may be an echo of Philocalos's "O first of sages," "The soundest judgment and the soundest heart."

Home, the clergyman, praised Hume's Deistic piety, observing that "So general was the respect to his Candor and merit that even good natured believers said of him . . . that he was the best Christian in the world without knowing it."⁶ Home considered *The Natural History of Religion* to be Hume's "capital production" and thought that even the essay "Of Miracles," viewed as "a vindication of the order of nature and a defense of divine Providence against Imposters and Enthusiasts," may "be regarded as the most pious of all human compositions."⁷ Hume's Deism is affirmed by Philocalos: "You take the truly philosophic road/ "That leads through nature up to nature's God."

Philocalos's view of Hume's treatment in the *History of England* of the civil discord and religious fanaticism that racked Scotland during the seventeenth century appears to be that of the "moderate party" of clerics (of which Home was a member), who sought to combine Christian piety with humane learning:

Long civil discord vast confusion spread,
Her sons were furies, and the Muses fled;
Yet the pretence to piety so nice,
Learning was held profane, and genius vice;

³ *A Sketch of the Character of Mr. Hume and Diary of a Journey from Morpeth to Bath 23 April - 1 May, 1776* by John Home, ed. David Fate Norton (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

And it is interesting that Hume's narrative of the religious fanaticism that gripped Scotland in this period is presented not as the alienated and debunking criticism of the *philosophe* but as the empathetic criticism of a fellow countryman:

As your immortal annals well disclose,
Your patriot-bosom weeping o'er her woes.

The poem was written in the mid-day of what has come to be known as the Scottish Enlightenment. The greatness of Scotland in literature is contrasted with the intellectual poverty of the English, the "barbarians on the banks of Thames," who "Despise the Scot, and hate the lettered sage." In the letters of the last decade of his life, Hume bitterly complains about how English letters had been captured by religious and political faction, especially the latter. Writing to William Strahan, his publisher and fellow Scot, in 1773, Hume says: "For as to any Englishman, that Nation is so sunk in Stupidity and Barbarism and Faction that you may as well think of Lapland for an Author. The best Book that has been writ by any Englishman these thirty Years (for Dr Franklyn is an American) is Tristram Shandy, bad as it is. A Remark which may astonish you; but which you will find true on Reflection" (L, II, 269). Hume's judgment appears to be corroborated by Bernard Bailyn, who has remarked on the politicization of English literature during this period. From "the end of the war in 1713 until the crisis over America," he writes, the triumph of Britain in commerce, war, and liberty "was the constant theme not only of formal state pronouncements and of political essays, tracts, and orations but of belles-lettres as well."⁸

In March, 1776, Hume wrote to Gibbon thanking him for a copy of the *Decline and Fall* and expressing surprise that such an important work could have been written by an Englishman: "You may smile at this Sentiment; but as it seems to me that your Countrymen, for almost a whole Generation, have given themselves up to barbarous and absurd Faction, and have totally neglected all polite Letters, I no longer expected any valuable Production ever to come from them" (L, II, 310). The Whig ideology which had distracted English literature for nearly a generation was based on an understanding of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, namely that it was the restoration of an ancient *English* constitution which exited prior to the Norman conquest. But since the union of the English and Scottish Parliaments did not occur until 1707, it was easy to see the Scots as an alien and problematic addition to the constitution. Vulgar anti-Scot-

⁸Bernard Bailyn, *Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1968), pp. 17-18.

tish prejudice had ample material to work upon. The ancient *English* constitution had been threatened by the Scottish Stuart kings and Jacobite rebellions. The Scots had had political and family connections with the French for centuries, and the French, in Whig ideology, were regularly described as "Turkish" tyrants or slaves. The Scots, it might appear, like the French, had an authoritarian cast of mind foreign to the English. The Wilkes and Liberty riots, which began in 1763, surfaced again in 1768, and continued off and on for two more years, exploited these anti-Scottish themes. A Scotsman of merit seeking appreciation for his achievements had much to contend with. Hume bitterly wrote Gilbert Eliot in 1764: "Can you seriously talk of my continuing an Englishman? Will they allow us to be so? Do they not treat with Derision our Pretensions to that Name, and with Hatred our just pretensions to surpass and to govern them" (L, II, 470).

The cultural energy of the English has not only been dissipated in political faction, it has been consumed, says Philocalos, in "Lucre's sordid flames." The reference here is to Pitt's mercantile wars (the Seven Years War), which left Britain with a vast empire and an unprecedented public debt. Hume referred to Pitt, in 1775, in a letter to Strahan, as that "wicked Madman Pitt" (L, II, 301). Pitt's policy was to dominate world trade through sea power. Commercial wars and an ever expanding debt had placed inordinate power in the hands of London merchants and investors. Pitt was the first minister to govern from a base of power outside of Parliament, which prompted Samuel Johnson's remark that whereas Walpole was a minister given by the King to the people, Pitt was a minister given by the people to the King. "The "people" in this case were the commercial interests centered in London as the hub of a mercantile empire. John Wilkes exploited the same base of power as did Pitt's friend William Beckford, who was twice Lord Mayor of London. The power of London had become so great that it seemed to many to challenge the independence of Parliament and, hence, the rule of law. In July, 1769, the city of London presented a petition to the King, which was ignored. Hume thought a rebellion was possible and wrote to Strahan in November, 1769: "I wish only the army may be faithful, and the militia quiet. . . ." (L, II, 211-12). In March, 1770, the City drew up a Remonstrance and Petition calling for the dissolution of Parliament and the removal of evil ministers. The Remonstrance and Petition were published in the newspapers, and bowing to public opinion, on March 14, the King was finally compelled to receive it. The next day Walpole wrote: "Rebellion is in prospect, and in everybody's mouth" (L, II 217n).

The Caledonian Mercury was the major newspaper in Edinburgh at the time the poem appeared and had been in existence for over forty years. It

had more literary merit than its competitor *The Edinburgh Evening Courant*. Having examined every issue of the *Courant* and the *Mercury* from 1765-1776 (minus the *Mercury* for 1770 which does not appear to be extant), it is remarkable that no such attention is given to anyone else. The comings and goings of public figures in Edinburgh are seldom mentioned, and when they are, it is usually in a sentence or two at the back of the paper. The poem welcoming Hume, however, takes up a third of the front page of a four page paper! Whether or not John Home wrote the poem, its significance is that it presents a bold picture of Hume, in Edinburgh's leading newspaper, as a beloved public figure. 'Philocalos' means lover of beauty or of the fair, a fitting name for an admirer of *Le bon David*. How much of Edinburgh public opinion the poem represents is hard to say. In 1776, the *Weekly Magazine*, an Edinburgh literary journal, published "A Short but impartial Account of the Life and Character of the late David Hume." Like Philocalos, the author judged that Hume's work in philosophy and history "has placed him on equality with the most celebrated names either in antient or modern story." The author grants that Hume's philosophy is skeptical but it is not the sort of skepticism that is incompatible with religion. The anti-clerical strain in his thought was a reaction to the religious barriers which prevented him in 1745 from being appointed to the chair in moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh: "It was from this period that he declared open and irreconcilable war, not only against the presbytery of Edinburgh, but against the whole body of the clergy."⁹

But the old animosities had not died away, for three years earlier in the same *Weekly Magazine* a short article entitled "Character of the Works of David Hume, Esq." was published in which the author wonders if Hume's picture of human nature is not "the worst executed portrait that ever was drawn?" Hume's conception of morals is utterly nihilistic: "after he has, with great labour and art, endeavoured to establish some determined idea of virtue, he again unhinges all, and abandons this idea to the sport of human passions and customs." But the author concludes with the comforting thought that "this monster of learning, so treacherous to the peace of mankind, has been combated and subdued by more than one antagonist."¹⁰

The poem is printed here with the kind permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland and appears as in the text except for footnotes and the use of modern type.

⁹*Weekly Magazine*, 33 (1776), 400.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 22 (1773), 233-4.

To the Publisher of the Caledonian Mercury.

S I R,

YOUR inserting the following poem, however, unequal to the merit of the gentleman it attempts to celebrate, will very much oblige your constant reader and humble servant,

PHILOCALOS.

To D—— H——, Esq; on his return to Edinburgh.

———Propter amorem. Lucret.

O thou to Albion's deathless honour born,
 Whom worth, wit, wisdom, eloquence, adorn;
 To whom the gods their richest gifts impart,
 The soundest judgment and the soundest heart:
 O first of sages! whose immortal page,
 In spite of bigot zeal and party rage,
 Illumes the lamp of reason in the mind,
 And holds a faithful mirror to mankind;
 No gaudy nothings in thy works reside;
 No air-built systems, flatt'ring human pride;
 No venal incense burnt at Fortune's shrine;
 To pamper malice no invective thine.
 From Virtue's basis, by no passions hurl'd,
 You walk innocuous through a noxious world;
 In silence hears its furious spleen and spite,
 And trusts posterity to do you right.
 Whate'er thy modest disquisitions scan,
 (Always the friend of truth and friend of man)
 You take the truly philosophic road
 "That leads through nature up to nature's God."
 Where e'er did penetration more abound?
 Where e'er was less presumption ever found?
 What dignity of stile adorns each piece?—
 We think of antient Rome, of Antient Greece;
 Around the Muses and the Graces fly,
 While Hermes and Apollo whisper nigh.
 Accept the tribute of a home-bred Muse,
 That burns to bind her garland on thy brows,
 Nor let Edina's joy your blushes raise,
 Who only follows Europe in your praise.
 My son! my son! methinks she, smiling, cries,
 (Maternal fondness bursting from her eyes)
 My son! my son! delighted with the sound,
 From street to street her echoing domes resound;
 Her bosom glowing with a mother's flame,

While thus she prosecutes the pleasing theme:
Thrice welcome! welcome to thy native home!
No more, I trust, through foreign climes to roam;
Too long does bus'ness, though a Monarch press,
Detain your steps from Wisdom's calm recess;
While meaner talents guide affairs of state,
'Tis yours, my son, more nobly to be great.
Enough you've listen'd to ambition's call,
Ah! think of what you said on Bacon's fall*:
Henceforth, sequester'd haunt my calm retreats,
And plant a British Athens in my gates.
So when the mind unbends its stronger powers
May wit and beauty sooth your social hours.
Though Britain's bravest sons their visit pay,
Young Douglas! Piercy! names that ne'er decay, }
And the great patron of the heaven-born Gay;
Much fond Britannia's noblest blood to see,
Much fond of valour, fonder still of thee!
Though num'rous heroes blazon Scotia's name
No sage, since Napier, equal to thy fame.
Long civil discord vast confusion spread,
Her sons were furies, and the Muses fled;
Yet the pretence to piety so nice,
Learning was held profane, and genius vice;
As your immortal annals well disclose,
Your patriot-bosom weeping o'er her woes.
What tho' Lodona's over-weening pride,
Fond of her race, and just to few beside,
Refuse the merit Europe's wits proclaim,
And sicken at the sound of your name;
What tho' barbarians on the banks of Thames,
Their genius sunk in Lucre's sordid flames,
Despise the Scot, and hate the letter'd sage,
Your fame, my son, shall stretch from age to age;
Like some great stream, indignant, burst each mound,
While sallow envy prostrate bites the ground.
Let then Lodona still with greatness dwell,
Let courts and commerce all her triumphs swell;
With Wilkes and Liberty, and Green and Horne,
And P—t, and Beck——d, ring from morn to morn;
Let patriot-worthies, in her own Guildhall,
Teach Monarchs wisdom, and be all in all:
For joys so turbulent I ne'er shall pine,
Nor e'er shall envy, while a HUME is mine.

[* *Hist. of Great Britain, vol. 1st, 4to edit.*]