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Notes and Documents

Hume and Kames—A Rejoinder

A friendly rejoinder to the article "Hume and Kames," published in the July issue of *SSL* (VI, July 1968, 3-19), is perhaps in order. Mr. McGuinness does well to remind us in his colourful way of the primacy of Hume's intellect, but he ignores some salient facts, he has got others wrong, and he seems determined to push to extremes his thesis about Kames "plagiarizing" from *A Treatise of Human Nature* and this causing Hume to be indignant (see his Wisconsin Ph.D. dissertation, 1964, for an elaboration).

The issue of plagiarizing or priority of ideas with Kames or Hume or Franklin or anyone else cannot be fully treated on the basis of a study of Hume's letters, Boswell's *Private Papers*, and Dean Randall's Yale dissertation. Knowledge of Kames's correspondence (Abercairny Collection, Scottish Record Office) and other manuscript sources is surely necessary, also of such printed sources as John Thomson's *Account . . . of William Cullen* (1832). It is even a question if plagiarizing is an issue of any importance, given the conditions of intellectual life in eighteenth-century Scotland. Hume was clearly a gadfly to the *literati*, but there was a great deal of interaction and mutual stimulation among the group, and they welcomed each other's lights on the science of man as they conceived it. Reading their letters and papers one gets a sense of their great desire to add to the common stock of learning, without any stress on private property rights in ideas. That is more of a twentieth-century obsession.

As to the facts in the article: far from being a "vocal member" of the Rankenian Club (p. 4), Kames may not have belonged to it at all. No source that I know lists him among its members, and in giving Boswell an account of it, he confused it with Ruddiman's classical club. Kames was not a "Chief Justice" (p. 9) or a "Lord of Sessions" (p. 14), terms unknown in Scotland. His failure to become a judge before 1752 was probably due to political considerations rather than intellectual ones. As a member of Scotland's supreme civil court his title was that of a Lord of Council and Session. He did not become a justiciar, a member of Scotland's supreme criminal court, until 1763.

Some mention should be made of Kames's good offices in prevailing

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on Francis Hutcheson to read the first two books of the *Treatise* in 1739 (see *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, IV, 1966, 69-72). Kames's own reading of the *Treatise* with some understanding should be pushed forward to 1741, at least (*contra* p. 10). The operative phrase in Boswell's account concerns the scene of the reading, a "farm in the country." Kames took no interest in farming until after his father's death in 1741, when he succeeded to the family estate. It is entirely reasonable that an extensive law practice, duties connected with the Faculty of Advocates, and the labour of preparing his *Dictionary of Decisions* (1741) prevented Kames from giving careful attention to Hume's book until 1741. Kames's *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Religion* (1751), his answer to the *Treatise*, is not an "insult" to Hume (*contra* p. 15), but an attempt to establish an alternative common sense philosophy.

Kames backed Hume's candidacy for an Edinburgh professorship in 1745. He was "never hearty in [Hume's] settlement" as tutor to the mad Marquess of Annandale (*contra* p. 11), giving the interesting reason that he did not "consider the Terms offered as any sufficient Temptation for [Hume] to relinquish his Studies" (letter of 14 April 1745, Historical Soc. of Pennsylvania). Once he was at Weldehall, near St. Albans, the country house of the Marquis, Hume as a desperate move in the campaign for the professorship wrote *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh: containing Some Observations on A Specimen of the Principles concerning Religion and Morality, said to be maintain'd in a Book lately publish'd, intituled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c.* This was advertized in the *Caledonian Mercury* and *Edinburgh Evening Courant* on 21 May 1745 (*contra* p. 11). Hume wrote to Kames on 13 June: "I am sorry you shou'd have found yourself oblig'd to print the Letter I wrote to Mr Coutts [Lord Provost of Edinburgh and Hume's chief sponsor for the professorship], it being so hastily compos'd that I scarce had time to revise it" (*New Hume Letters*, 1954, p. 15). The *Letter* apparently had no effect, and on 6 June the Edinburgh newspapers carried a notice declaring that William Cleghorn had been preferred to the office of Professor of Moral Philosophy. Hume's defeat was caused by political rather than intellectual considerations, his supporters on the Town Council being the weaker party. When Hume heard the result from Kames, his feeling seemed to be a mixture of gratitude to Coutts for backing him and vexation at the Provost's mishandling of his candidacy: "I am as little surpriz'd as I am vext at the Turn this Affair has taken. I have indeed a great Regard as well as Sense of Gratitude for Mr Coutts, & am heartily sorry he shou'd have been defeated by a Pack of Scoundrels, tho it was entirely

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by his own Fault" (*New Hume Letters*, 16-17). On the same occasion, Hume expressed his sorrow at the prospect of not seeing Kames for a long time as one outcome of the defeat. The *Letter to a Gentleman* itself was unknown till recently except by title, but a copy has come to light and found a home in the National Library of Scotland. A facsimile was published by Edinburgh University Press in 1967, with a valuable introduction by Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price.

On the question of the quality of Kames's *Elements of Criticism*, Boswell reports Hume and Adam Smith saying hard things (in private). We should not forget, however, that there was a streak of malice in Boswell, and he did not particularly admire the Scottish *literati*. They responded by teasing him about Dr Johnson, as on the occasion in 1775, when Hume at Kames's breakfast-table offered to give Boswell half a crown "for every page of [Johnson's] Dictionary in which he could not find an absurdity" (Boswell, *Letters*, 1924, I, 233-34). As far as Hume's attitude to *Elements of Criticism* can be established with any accuracy, it seems to have been one of good-humoured surprise that the book did so well in running through a number of editions. Hume being piqued about Kames stealing his ideas is quite another matter. In a forthcoming article in *Texas Studies in Literature & Language*, I present some correspondence showing how Hume, in 1773, in a typically kindly fashion, undertook to read some "animadversions" on *Elements of Criticism* and then advised Kames about making appropriate corrections for a fifth edition.

It is not my concern here or elsewhere to be "pro-Kames" or anti-Hume: it will suffice if I do something to keep the biographical record straight. There were distinct phases in the Kames-Hume relationship. A period of close friendship ended about 1748, when Hume published his *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*. He included his "Essay on Miracles," which Kames had advised him not to print on grounds of prudence. In the 1760's, there was something of an estrangement between the two men. The reason, in all probability, is that Hume would not pay court to Kames. This much can be deduced from a letter Mrs Agatha Home (Kames's wife) wrote to Hume in 1764, when David was private secretary to the British ambassador: ". . . we are all glad to have good accounts of you; you are too great a man to write to us, & Mr Home [Kames] says you was too great a man before you went to bid him farewell, however he wishes you well" (Hume MSS, Royal Soc. of Edinburgh, V. 80). On Hume's return to Edinburgh in 1769 and in the 1770's, there was a *rapprochement* though not a revival of the early intimacy, and Hume was to be found at Kames's Edinburgh

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house and his country house, Blair-Drummond. There is no question that Hume's was the more seminal mind. Kames's personality was quirky and complex, lacking the sunniness of Hume's, and he may have claimed more than his due as a patron of genius. His chief contribution to the Scottish Enlightenment was that of an *agitateur des idées*, and this role needs careful examination. On the evidence of his dissertation, Mr McGuinness has much to tell us about Kames's aesthetic doctrines as a part of the intellectual ferment of the eighteenth century. Let us hear more about those doctrines and not about fanciful biographical issues.

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