

The Long View

The David Hume Institute meeting on 28 March was treated to an excellent presentation by **Lord Stewart Sutherland** (former Principal of the University of Edinburgh) on his chosen topic for his Presidential Address of: *'Is an enlightenment still possible: [David] Hume and the rise of fundamentalist religion'*.

It was quite the most stunning presentation I have heard yet of an account of **David Hume's** philosophy and his approach to life in Edinburgh under the then not inconsiderable public influence of the 'Taliban-like' wing of the Church of Scotland. 'Le bon David' attracted more than his share of attention from the zealots, as did Adam Smith's mentor, Professor Francis Hutcheson, an ordained minister in the Ulster protestant church, during his years at the University of Glasgow. Smith managed to keep his 'head down' on matters of religious doctrine; Hume did not, but Hume's gentle kindness and patience with his critics kept him 'safe' from the fundamentalists, despite their two significant 'victories' in keeping him out of two chairs in moral philosophy, one in Edinburgh and the other in Glasgow, possibly an unwanted record for either university, given Hume's international status as Britain's foremost philosopher since our barbarian, even savage, forebears gave up hunting in the forests for shepherding and farming 6,000 years ago.

Hume and Smith became close friends after Smith published 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments' in 1759 – they probably met as early as 1751, but it took sometime before they relaxed into a warmer friendship, judging by the mutual changes in salutations in their surviving correspondence. While they had numerous philosophical differences (of greater interest to historians than to modern students), they did not quarrel over them – Hume never quarrelled with anybody, though many quarrelled with him, and not just the usual zealots from the Church; J. J. Rousseau's paranoia manufactured a quarrel with the gentle,

and innocent, Hume. In fact, Hume always thanked his most trenchant critics for their views, which made it difficult to pick fights with him (hence, his French reputation as 'le bon David').

His temperament fed into his relaxed attitude to society's problems. When you cease to be overly anxious about the passing events of the day, you tend to take the long view of how society changes for the better or for worse. You settle for understanding, and in understanding you calm down and avoid the burdens of the 'men of system', who have absolute answers for everything. Taking the historical approach, as both Hume and Smith did, you see the familiar ranges of behaviour in every epoch and learn not to be disappointed about the conduct of the human species.

Hume's six-volume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, can be read as a history of the perennial human condition, as can his numerous and brilliant essays, from which much can be gleaned from having stood the test of time. Likewise, though more subtly, Smith's historical approach in all of his books from his 'juvenile' history of astronomy (began while at Oxford in the early 1740s and posthumously published in 1795), through to the last editions of both *Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations* published months before he died in 1790, were imbued with his long view, perhaps captured in his oft repeated phrase, 'slowly and gradually', when discussing changing events and processes. His long friendship with James Hutton, the early geologist, whose speculations on the history of the Earth being measured in millions of years seeped into Smith's thinking about the 'slow and gradual' timescales needed for changes in human affairs. Such enlightened thinking was in contrast to the precise timescales envisaged by **Bishop Ussher** (1581-1656), Primate of All Ireland, of the Earth being created on Sunday, 23 October 4004 BC.

Listening to **Stewart Sutherland**, both at the lecture and at the small dinner later, I was struck by his understanding and erudite expressions of Hume's thinking, which he articulated for a fairly sophisticated audience and in the discussions that followed. He showed how valuable the ideas articulated by

Hume, and transmitted to a modern audience 231 years after he died in 1776, were today, which answered his question: 'Is an enlightenment still possible?' The answer must be 'yes', if we bring to modern problems the same long view articulated by Hume, Smith, Hutton, Ferguson, Kames, Black, Simson, Stewart and the others in the years of the Scottish Enlightenment. I certainly saw, for that moment at least, what David Hume was about and it felt good.

As we left, I mentioned to a fellow dinner guest that a hundred yards away from where we said 'good night' was the St David's Street where David Hume lived (and died). He looked surprised, but I noticed he strode off into the night across St Andrew Square to have a look (I was going in the other direction). But that's Edinburgh; that's its beauty. We walk the same streets as walked the scholars of the first Enlightenment. Most people walk by their haunts, their clubs and places where they dined, conversed and listened to what their fellows had to say in short papers, drinking their claret, port, beer or tea, and gossiped the hours away. It was quite a memorable evening.