



### **The Author of the *Abstract Revisited***

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*Hume Studies* Volume XIX, Number 1 (April, 1993) 213-215.

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# The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited

David Raynor

In a recent issue of *Hume Studies*, J. O. Nelson challenges the received view that Hume himself composed the *Abstract*, and argues instead that we *know* that Adam Smith wrote it.<sup>1</sup> But his main argument is so blatantly fallacious that charity requires that we interpret his intervention as a *jeu d'esprit*. I have no idea why he wishes to tease Hume scholars so mercilessly. Most probably he wishes to keep the issue of the authorship of the *Abstract* alive until either someone disproves his belief that Smith wrote the pamphlet, or the scholarly community comes round to accepting Smith as the real author. Whatever his motive, I intend here to squelch his mischievous conjecture once and for all.

Nelson first sought to cast doubt on Hume's authorship of the *Abstract* in an article published in *The Philosophical Quarterly* for 1976. In the fifteen years since that paper appeared, he has become convinced that Smith wrote the pamphlet. It was not always so. Here is how he judiciously concluded his earlier article: "According to the external evidence it is most improbable that Hume was the author of the *Abstract* and it is plausible to suppose that Adam Smith was; but according to the internal evidence, it is most improbable that Adam Smith was its author and almost certain that Hume was. How these incompatible conclusions are to be resolved I have no idea."<sup>2</sup> Nelson now has no doubt that any such discomfort should be resolved by allowing the external evidence to outweigh the internal, because he has come to regard the external evidence as showing that it is not simply *improbable* that Hume wrote the work, but downright *impossible*.

Nelson's entire case rests on the identity of the "Mr Smith" referred to in a letter of 4 March, 1740 from Hume at Ninewells to Professor Francis Hutcheson at Glasgow. The crucial passage reads:

My Bookseller has sent to Mr Smith a Copy of my Book, which I hope he has receiv'd, as well as your Letter. I have not yet heard what he has done with the *Abstract*. Perhaps you have. I have got it printed in London; but not in the *Works of the Learned*; there having been an article with regard to my Book, somewhat abusive, printed in that Work, before I sent up the *Abstract*.<sup>3</sup>

Until Keynes and Sraffa argued otherwise in their 1938 edition of the *Abstract*, some scholars believed that Adam Smith was the “Mr Smith” referred to in *H*, and that he wrote the *Abstract* at Hutcheson’s suggestion. Keynes and Sraffa instead argued that the “Mr Smith” was John Smith, Hutcheson’s Dublin publisher, and that Hume himself wrote the *Abstract* (as all the internal evidence suggests). Norman Kemp Smith, in a review of Keynes and Sraffa’s edition, accepted their interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Now Nelson seeks to prove all of them wrong. He argues thus: the “Mr Smith” in *H* is *either* John Smith *or* Adam Smith; it can’t be John Smith; therefore it must be Adam Smith. We can readily agree with Nelson that the “Mr Smith” was not John Smith the Dublin publisher. But it will not follow—as Nelson supposes—that the man referred to must have been Adam Smith who, at the time, was still an undergraduate at Glasgow.

“But if the Mr Smith of *H* was not John Smith ... who could he be except the Adam Smith of the traditional theory?” asks Nelson.<sup>5</sup> I have elsewhere suggested that the man in question was William Smith, one of the publishers of the Amsterdam periodical *Bibliothèque raisonnée*.<sup>6</sup>

Hutcheson’s *Inquiry* had been published in Dublin by John Smith and William Smith. The latter subsequently moved to Amsterdam and married into the Wetstein publishing family. William Smith was responsible for directing the firm’s periodical, the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, which employed Pierre Desmaizeaux as its London correspondent. The issue of this periodical for April-June, 1735, published a letter from Hutcheson to his “ancien & intime Ami” William Smith concerning Robert Simson’s book on conic sections. In light of *H*, it is probable that copies of the first two books of the *Treatise*, a *manuscript* copy of the *Abstract*, and a letter from Hutcheson were sent to William Smith in early 1740.

The April-May-June issue of the *Bibliothèque raisonnée* for 1740 published a largely favourable review of the first two books of the *Treatise* which is mostly a translation of the *Abstract*.<sup>7</sup> It seems reasonable to conclude that Hutcheson was instrumental in arranging the reviews of the *Treatise* in his friend’s periodical. Perhaps parts of Hutcheson’s letter to the Amsterdam publisher even found their way into the reviews. However that may be, if the Mr Smith of *H* was William Smith of Amsterdam, there is no foundation at all for the conjecture that Adam Smith wrote the *Abstract*. That conjecture was based entirely on the external evidence of *H*, and the unwarranted assumption that the “Mr Smith” was either John Smith or Adam Smith, and nobody else. But we have seen that the evidence in *H* does not point away from Hume and towards Adam Smith. On the contrary, all of the presently available internal and external evidence points towards Hume as the author of the *Abstract*. Nothing suggests that Adam Smith

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wrote it. We may therefore safely conclude that Hume wrote the *Abstract*.

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1. John O. Nelson, "The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited," *Hume Studies* 17, no. 1 (April 1991): 83-86.
2. John O. Nelson, "Has the Authorship of *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature* Really Been Decided?" *The Philosophical Quarterly* 26, no. 102 (January 1976): 91.
3. David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932), 1:37 (this letter hereafter cited as *H*).
4. In *Mind* 47 (1938): 520-22. Kemp Smith pointed out that the entry on Hume in *The Universal Biographical Dictionary* (1800; 1826) includes the following passage: "[The *Treatise*] he published in London in 1738, but its reception not answering his expectations, he printed a small analysis of it, in a six-penny pamphlet, to make it sell." The unknown author of this entry possessed accurate inside information about Hume's motives in having the *Abstract* printed.
5. Nelson, "Authorship Revisited" (above, n. 1), 85.
6. David Raynor, "Hume and Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*," in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford, 1990), 248 n. 33.
7. See John W. Yolton, "Hume's *Abstract* in the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (1979): 157-58.