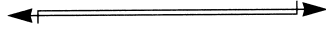


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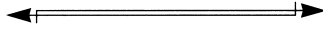




LAURENCE L. BONGIE

DAVID HUME

PROPHET OF THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION



LAURENCE L. BONGIE

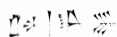
With a Foreword by Donald W. Livingston

SECOND EDITION



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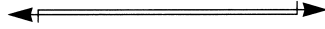
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FOREWORD



Philosophers rarely write history, and David Hume (1711–76) is unique in being recognized as one who made canonical contributions to both philosophy and history. Many think of Hume as a philosopher but in his own time he was known as an essayist and author of the six-volume *History of England* (1754–62). The *History* was a classic in his lifetime and went through at least 167 posthumous editions. It was the standard work on the subject for nearly a century, until Thomas Babington Macaulay's *History of England* began to challenge it in 1849. Even so, Hume's work was published—if finally only in an abridged form—continually into the twentieth century. Some editions issued in printings of 100,000. The young Winston Churchill learned English history from one of these abridgements known as “the student's Hume.”

The most substantial part of the *History* is Hume's account of the reign of the Stuarts, which included the English Civil War, the trial and execution of Charles I, and the establishment of a Puritan republic under Oliver Cromwell. The claim that the people had the legal authority to put to trial and to execute their sovereign shocked seventeenth-century Europe and cast a shadow far into the eighteenth century. Hume's account of these events quickly became the most forceful and memorable.

But the influence of the *History* was not confined to the English-speaking world. Laurence Bongie demonstrates that during the events leading up to the French Revolution and for a considerable time thereafter, Hume's account of the English Civil War was used by the French to make sense of the terrible events through which they were living. Hume had interpreted the revolution in England that led to the execution of Charles I and a Puritan republic under the military government of Cromwell as an intellectual and spiritual pathology mingled with ambition. What the Puritans eventually sought was not reform but a total transformation of the social and political order in accord with a religious ideology. Hume's narrative seemed isomorphic to what was happening in France. The goal of the French Revolution was not reform but a root and branch transformation of society. The Jacobins stood for the Puritans, and the Jacobins' self-evident truths of the rights of man stood for

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the self-certifying enthusiasms and revelations of the Puritans; Louis XVI was Charles I, and Napoleon was Cromwell.

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is commonly viewed as the origin of the modern conservative intellectual tradition, because he deemed the French Revolution to be an event unique to modern times: not at all an effort at reform but the hubristic attempt to transform the whole of society in accord with an ideology. But Hume before Burke had attached essentially this interpretation to the Puritan revolution in England. Additionally, if the intellectual core of conservatism is a critique of ideology in politics, then Hume's *History*—not Burke's *Reflections*—would appear to be the primal source of modern conservatism. Laurence Bongie, in *David Hume: Prophet of the Counter-revolution*, gives us good reason to think this was true of French conservative thought. Therefore, one might well wonder whether much of what Burke perceived in the French Revolution as a spiritual disorder was what Hume's account of the Puritan revolution had prepared him to see.

Thomas Jefferson considered Hume's *History* such a formidable force that he banned it from the University of Virginia. Of the work he wrote to William Duane on August 12, 1810, that it "has spread universal toryism over the land." Six years later, on November 25, 1816, Jefferson wrote of Hume's work to John Adams that, "This single book has done more to sap the free principles of the English Constitution than the largest standing army. . . ." Jefferson preferred John Baxter's *A New and Impartial History of England* (1796), which was a reworking of Hume's *History* from the Whig perspective and which Jefferson called "Hume's history republicanized." What Jefferson did not know (because he had not read the letters of the last decade of Hume's life) was that Hume supported complete independence for the American colonies as early as 1768 and—to the astonishment of his friends—held to that position until his death on August 25, 1776, five days after the complete text of the Declaration of Independence was published in Edinburgh's *Caledonian Mercury*. On October 27, 1775, Hume declared to his old friend Baron Mure, "I am an American in my principles, and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper." The man who dared "to shed a generous tear for the fate of Charles I" also resisted using violence to coerce the colonies back into a union from which they wished to secede.

Hume's political philosophy is dialectical and subtle and has given rise to contrary interpretations. But it is not Bongie's task to interpret it nor to judge whether Hume's *History* was correctly understood by those

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who read it during the revolutionary period in France. Rather, his task is to record the extraordinary influence that Hume's work exercised during this period. Drawing from a vast deposit of archival materials, Bongie has chipped away to reveal an unexpected glimpse through the wall of time that separates us from the French Revolution. A scene unfolds, rich in detail, in which the participants are allowed to speak for themselves through their words, their mute gestures, and above all their context. As with Bongie's other archival work—on Diderot, Prince Charles Edward Stuart, Condillac, and De Sade—one is left with an image in the memory more powerful than what a theoretical interpretation could provide. And, one comes away viewing Hume's *History* not simply as a narrative of events but as a force in the creation of modern political life.

DONALD W. LIVINGSTON

April 1998

PREFACE TO THE LIBERTY FUND EDITION



Much has changed in Hume studies since this book was first published in 1965. For example, the introduction to the first edition noted that Hume's *History* was "neither widely read nor readily available." The complete work had then been out of print since the end of the nineteenth century. Today, Hume's *History* is handily available in the Liberty Fund edition (1983–85, 6 vols.), and dozens of books along with scores of articles have focussed attention in recent years on Hume the historian. Perhaps most important of all, long-overdue recognition of the integral linkage between Hume's historical and philosophical writings has opened up one of the most rewarding avenues of inquiry in current Hume studies.

History being one of the more ephemeral arts, most studies like this one, after an interval of several decades, have necessarily forfeited some degree of relevance. If this work is still able in some measure to make a contribution, it is no doubt because—in an area wherein the violent battles of the past are constantly being reformulated and refought by the factions of the present—it chooses to focus exclusively on interrogation of the primary texts, texts that are invited to speak as much as possible for themselves. *David Hume, Prophet of the Counter-revolution* does not set out to decree what "really" happened during the Great Rebellion in England or what was "really" going on during France's even greater Revolution when, in an ongoing conflation of day-to-day history and counter-revolutionary historiography, the lessons and parallels drawn from Hume's *History of the Stuarts* were regularly weighed and scrutinized. Rather, my study focusses on the interplay of conflicting perceptions, privileged as the only "facts" that are relevant to the investigation. Whether such facts can exist independently of their interpretative perceptions and whether they can be stripped bare and objectively recovered in uncorrupted form by the "scientific" historian are very large questions that I do not pursue here.

As much the courageous contrarian, sceptical exploder of myths, and lucid revisionist in history as he was in philosophy, David Hume prided

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himself on having written the first impartial account of the English Revolution. England's Whig establishment hotly disputed Hume's claim, but on the other side of the Channel the French reading public's admiration and praise for the "godlike" fairness of the "English Tacitus" knew no bounds. With the coming of the French Revolution, Hume's much lauded impartiality, the tear he shed for the fate of Charles I, became an important element in counter-revolutionary ideology. The ghost of our philosopher-historian who wrote his *History* for fame almost as much as for truth was probably not displeased by the flattering attention accorded the "lessons" of his *History* at every stage of France's bloody upheaval. Now, two centuries later, delighted by the explosion of renewed interest in his great work, David Hume's ghost is undoubtedly still smiling benevolently and taking well-deserved curtain calls.

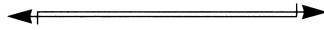
NOTE: In this Liberty Fund edition, all of the French documentation, representing over one-third of the original Oxford University Press text, has been translated into English. All of the translations are my own.

L. L. B.

April 1998

INTRODUCTION

I



David Hume was undoubtedly the eighteenth-century British writer whose works were most widely known and acclaimed on the continent during the later Enlightenment period. Ample proof of the great reputation he acquired in France as an historian and philosopher at this time is readily available. Contrary to various expectations, however, evidence of a profound influence as opposed to the mere reputation of his purely philosophical writings has proved to be disappointingly meagre. Occasionally even, Hume's most telling impact in this respect appears, not in the works of his brother *philosophes*, who largely misunderstood or willfully ignored his highly original epistemological doctrine, but—usually through the device of retortion—in the writings of their greatest enemies, the religious traditionalists.¹

Less surprising, perhaps, is the fact that these same traditionalists in formulating their political principles found it possible to profit to an even greater extent from Hume's historical writings. His unrivalled history of the Stuarts had not only enjoyed spectacular success in eighteenth-century France; it had related as well what many viewed as the most significant, or at least the most horrifying, series of political events in the annals of modern Europe, namely the seventeenth-century English revolution. The particular manner in which Hume had narrated the hapless career of Charles I and had presented the short-lived English republican experiment was to seem to many French conservatives, both before and after 1789, of great practical applicability in their defence of the *ancien régime*. It will be seen, I think, that Hume's impact here was of undeniable importance, greater even for a time than the related influence of Burke, although it represents a contribution to French counter-

1. See my "Hume and skepticism in late eighteenth-century France," in J. van der Zande and R. H. Popkin, eds., *The Skeptical Tradition Around 1800: Skepticism in Philosophy, Science, and Society* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998), pp. 15–29.

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revolutionary thought which, unlike that of Burke, has been almost totally ignored by historians to this day.

It is perhaps necessary to indicate at this point certain limitations which I have felt it wise to impose on this study. I have attempted—admittedly not always with complete success—to disregard the question of Hume’s “true” intentions or the real nature of his political thought. Such considerations, however important they may be in themselves, seem largely irrelevant to an investigation of the kind I have undertaken. Similarly, I have not tried to make any general assessment of the merits of David Hume as an historian.² Whether Hume interpreted well or badly the events of Stuart history, whether he was more of a Tory than Burke was a Whig, is of little consequence to my purpose. My chief concern has not been with what really happened in England between 1603 and 1660 nor even primarily with what Hume really said about the Great Rebellion although, with regard to this last point, I have provided in the second part of my introduction a brief survey of his general views concerning the activities of that period.

What has been my major concern in the present study is rather the manner in which the French, from the *ancien régime* to the counter-revolutionary period, interpreted Hume’s very popular history of those crucial English events. That the French *misinterpreted* the Scottish historian in many instances is, of course, entirely possible, but I have not insisted on this point. Influence thrives on illusion as easily as on truth. It is the image—whether faithful or distorted—that transmits influence. It will be seen that Hume’s version of English history projected at first against the background of pre-revolutionary politics a number of blurred and even contradictory images. Later, however, the continental focus of interpretation sharpened acutely as the urgency of contemporary events compelled the Scottish historian’s various French readers to unify more militantly their political views.

II



When, in his *History of the Stuarts*, Hume came to consider the scholarly merits of his predecessor Clarendon, he gave expression to a sentiment

2. In general, I have throughout this work relinquished the use of secondary source materials, since it would seem especially important in a study of image and influence to allow the original documents to speak as much as possible for themselves. Spelling in the quotations has been standardized.

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which he might easily have allowed, I think, to be quite properly applied to himself. The “entertaining” Clarendon in his most “candid” history of the Great Rebellion is, Hume tells us, “more partial in appearance than in reality”; for though he seems perpetually anxious to apologize for the King, his apologies “are often well grounded.”³

In the seventeen-fifties when Hume composed his *History of the Stuarts* it was clearly neither fashionable nor profitable to apologize for King Charles. The Whig party, Hume tells us, had, for a course of nearly seventy years, enjoyed the whole authority of government. In some particulars the state had not suffered as a result. But history, certainly, had suffered and truth had suffered. The biased writings of such apologists as Rapin-Thoyras, Locke, and Sidney were praised and propagated as if they equalled the most celebrated compositions of antiquity. “And forgetting,” Hume complains, “that a regard to liberty, though a laudable passion, ought commonly to be subordinate to a reverence for established government, the prevailing faction has celebrated only the partisans of the former, who pursued as their object the perfection of civil society, and has extolled them at the expense of their antagonists, who maintained those maxims that are essential to its very existence” (IX. 524). Liberty is a good and noble principle but it has its dangers and if one has to choose, it is surely much better for human society “to be deprived of liberty than to be destitute of government” (VII. 125–26). Hume also observes that extremes of all kinds in these matters are to be avoided; truth and certainty are most likely to be met with on middle ground. There is little doubt that Hume hoped his own history would be seen as brilliantly impartial. In fact, he may even have believed that he would, by some miracle, please all factions with his “moderate opinions.”

As he set about his attack on the fortress of Whig dogma, Hume made persistent and unwavering use of one favourite weapon: his contrary—and, many thought, perverse—view of what the English constitution was like before the accession of the Stuart kings. The partisans of liberty were in the habit of affirming that the English constitution, long before the settlement of 1688, was “a regular plan of liberty.” They heaped abuse on James I and Charles I as usurpers and innovators in the hated arts of despotism. But what a paradox in human affairs it is, Hume objected, that Henry VIII should have been almost adored in his lifetime

3. David Hume, *The History of England*, London, 1808–10, VIII. 414. Further references in this section to *The History of England* will be placed within parentheses in the text itself.

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and his memory be respected, “while Charles I should, by the same people, at no greater distance than a century, have been led to a public and ignominious execution, and his name be ever after pursued by falsehood and by obloquy!” (X. 205, note F to vol. VIII.) Hume found a similar paradox in Whig estimates of Elizabeth’s reign. However different it may have been in other particulars, the government of England under Elizabeth bore, with respect to the question of liberty, a distinct resemblance to that of the eighteenth-century Turks (VI. 414). Under Elizabeth the legislative power of Parliament was a mere illusion, the liberty of the subject nonexistent. And yet, Hume adds, the Whigs have long indulged their prejudices against the Stuarts “by bestowing unbounded panegyrics” on the virtue and wisdom of that Queen. They have even been so extremely ignorant of her reign as to praise her for a quality “which, of all others, she was the least possessed of; a tender regard for the constitution, and a concern for the liberties and privileges of her people” (VI. 403).

The popular party, on the other hand, exclaimed constantly against the arbitrary principles of Charles I. This was yet another paradox, to be sure, for “one may venture to assert,” Hume tells us, “that the greatest enemies of this Prince will not find, in the long line of his predecessors, from the conquest to his time, any one king, except perhaps his father, whose administration was not more arbitrary and less legal, or whose conduct could have been recommended to him by the popular party themselves, as a model, in this particular, for his government” (X. 205, note F to vol. VIII).

We are not to believe, however, that Hume looked back with fond regret to the days of the Tudors or Stuarts. This would be missing the entire point he attempted to make. No, the eighteenth-century English had no reason, following the example of their ancestors, to be in love with the picture of absolute monarchy “or to prefer the unlimited authority of the prince and his unbounded prerogatives to that noble liberty, that sweet equality, and that happy security, by which they are at present distinguished above all nations in the universe” (VI. 429–30). But the eighteenth-century English did have one obligation at least as they looked back on their own political history: this was the duty to approach past events with a proper sense of perspective. The activities of the Stuart kings, though they might appear arbitrary and illegal to Englishmen in the seventeen-fifties, could, if judged according to the principles and practices of the times in which they were carried out, “admit of some apology.” After all, most of the modern liberties were, in the days of the Stuarts, and to an even greater extent during the Tudor period, totally

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unknown and deemed everywhere to be incompatible with all good government. "It seems unreasonable," Hume maintained, "to judge of the measures embraced during one period, by the maxims which prevail in another" (VII. 204).

Hume clearly felt that he had achieved this just sense of perspective and the result is that he made every effort while dealing with the civil-war period to understand and forgive the policies of James I and Charles I. Whether he also understood and forgave with equal sympathy and justice the policies of their opponents has remained, however, a matter of much heated debate ever since the first volume of his *Stuarts* appeared in 1754.

For Hume the moral issues of the case are not simplified, moreover, by the fact that what were traditionally described as the major vices of these early Stuarts could equally well be viewed as ill-timed but honest virtues. These were not the grander virtues, to be sure, but the every-day virtues of sincerity, integrity, and conviction. These kings were not "great" men but they were "good" men. In all history, for example, it would be difficult to find a reign "less illustrious, yet more unspotted and unblemished, than that of James" (VI. 662). Perhaps James erred occasionally in forgetting to ask himself the question *What is best?* This is because he believed in all piety that the question *What is established?* was more important. Hume has no doubts about what was established when James came to the English throne. Everyone accepted in those times the doctrine of blind and unlimited passive obedience to the prince. Under no pretence had it ever been seen as lawful for subjects to depart from or infringe that doctrine. So completely had these principles prevailed that, during the reigns of Elizabeth and her predecessors, opposition to them was regarded as the most flagrant sedition not only by the monarch but by the people as well. James I had thus inherited an absolute throne. His predecessor was, for example, allowed to have a *divine* right; was not James I's title quite plainly the same as that of his predecessor? Was it not natural for him to take the government as he found it and to pursue the long-applauded measures of the popular Elizabeth? Perhaps, Hume adds, but it is something of an afterthought, James should have realized that his character and his circumstances could not support so extensive an authority. In fact his major difficulties arose chiefly from these circumstances which had suffered during his reign a radical transformation. Partly as a result of the changing economic situation, partly as a result of the increase in knowledge, a new spirit of liberty was born at this time and spread rapidly under the shelter of "puritanical absurdities"—that theological plague which had so suddenly and inexplicably infested the peo-

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ple. The results were disastrous to all hopes for stable government, since the religious spirit, when it mingles with faction, contains in it, our sceptical historian believed, "something supernatural and unaccountable" (VI. 569). Ordinary human prudence, the usual trust in cause and effect is baffled by it and the operation of every motive which normally influences human society fails (VII. 171).

Now this spirit of religion or rather of *enthusiasm*, uncontrolled, obstinate, and dangerous, violently inclined the Puritans to adopt republican principles and to form a strong attachment to civil liberty. The two principles are "nearly allied" (VI. 473), and by this prevalence of fanaticism a gloomy and sullenly independent disposition established itself among the people who became animated with a contempt for authority and a hatred for all other religions and especially for Catholicism. James, of course, helped matters not at all when, for essentially worthy reasons, he attempted to civilize the barbaric austerity of the sects by infusing a small tincture of ceremony and cheerfulness into this "dark spirit of devotion." Nor, alas, was Charles subsequently more fortunate in the consequences of his efforts to abate the people's extreme rage against popery. And yet, it must be confessed, Laud's innovations deserve our praise, for pious ceremonies, however ridiculous they may seem to a philosophical mind, can be very advantageous to the rude multitude and tend to mollify that fierce and gloomy spirit of devotion to which the rude multitude is subject. Even the English Church "may justly be thought too naked and unadorned, and still to approach too near the abstract and spiritual religion of the Puritans" (VII. 589). Laud and his associates by reviving a few primitive institutions of this nature had corrected the error of the first reformers. It is true that Laud had attempted to introduce the fine arts into religion "not with the enlarged sentiments and cool reflection of a legislator, but with the intemperate zeal of a sectary" (VII. 590). The net result of his action was to inflame that religious fury which he meant to repress. It is, however, "sufficient for his vindication to observe, that his errors were the most excusable of all those which prevailed during that zealous period" (loc. cit.). Indeed, whereas the crude political advantages derived by the parliamentary party from the judicial murder of the "magnanimous" Strafford, "one of the most eminent personages that has appeared in England" (VII. 330, 356), could perhaps in some degree palliate the iniquity of the sentence pronounced against him, the execution of England's old infirm prelate, on the other hand, "can be ascribed to nothing but vengeance and bigotry in those severe religionists, by whom the Parliament was entirely governed" (VII. 587).

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Mainly as a result of his worldly distaste for “enthusiasm,” Hume, we see, held a rather low opinion of the various parliamentary heroes. Was not Parliament after all the aggressor during this unhappy period of civil discord? The Stuart kings had fought only a defensive campaign forced on them by the fact that Parliament had unilaterally seen fit to change the rules of the game and had innovated violently in constitutional matters. All things considered, Hume readily admitted that many constitutions in the history of human affairs and “none more than the British” have in fact been improved by such violent innovations. He felt compelled to insist, nevertheless, that “the praise bestowed on those patriots to whom the nation has been indebted for its privileges, ought to be given with some reserve, and surely without the least rancour against those who adhered to the ancient constitution” (VI. 404). The motivation of these patriots is suspect. Hume notes, for example, that the untimely end of Hampden leaves doubtful and uncertain whether his conduct was founded in a love of power or a zeal for liberty. With Cromwell, of course, there is no such doubt and uncertainty. Hume sees him as a fanatical, ambitious hypocrite; an artful and audacious conspirator who from the beginning engaged in his crimes “from the prospect of sovereign power,” a temptation, Hume adds, which is, in general, “irresistible to human nature” (VII. 572). Hume admits, however, that Cromwell, by making some good use of the authority he had attained by fraud and violence, “has lessened, if not overpowered, our detestation of his enormities, by our admiration of his success and of his genius” (loc. cit.).

More repelled than amused by the “cant,” “mystical jargon,” “hypocrisy,” “fury,” and “fanaticism” of the Parliamentarians, Hume found himself unable to take too seriously patriotic attempts to dignify the Civil War with causes more considerable or noble than bigotry and theological zeal. Of course the Royalists too were zealots “but as they were at the same time maintaining the established constitution, in state as well as church, they had an object which was natural, and which might produce the greatest passion, even without any considerable mixture of theological fervour” (X. 183, note DD to vol. VII). The opponents of Charles did not fight for liberty; they fought for ignorant and fanatical trivialities. “The generality of the nation,” Hume writes, “could never have flown out into such fury in order to obtain new privileges and acquire greater liberty than they and their ancestors had ever been acquainted with. Their fathers had been entirely satisfied with the government of Elizabeth: why should they have been thrown into such extreme rage against Charles, who, from the beginning of his reign, wished only to maintain

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such a government? And why not, at least, compound matters with him, when by all his laws, it appeared that he had agreed to depart from it? Especially, as he had put it entirely out of his power to retract that resolution" (loc. cit.).

Perhaps the revolution, up to a certain point and despite its trivial origins, did achieve some positive good. During the first period of the Long Parliament's operations, if we except the cruel iniquity of Strafford's attainder, the merits of its transactions may be judged to outweigh its mistakes and even entitle those measures which remedied abuses and redressed grievances to the praise of "all lovers of liberty" (VII. 361). Hume even confesses a willingness at one point to admit that a few old eggs had to be broken to make the new omelette. Such is the price of progress, and if the means used to obtain these salutary results savour often of artifice and violence "it is to be considered, that revolutions of government cannot be effected by the mere force of argument and reasoning; and that factions, being once excited, men can neither so firmly regulate the tempers of others, nor their own, as to ensure themselves against all exorbitances" (VII. 362). But, while exalting their own authority and diminishing the king's, the patriots went too far and totally subverted the constitution. They forgot that authority as well as liberty is requisite to government and is even requisite to the support of liberty itself, by maintaining the laws which can alone regulate and protect it (VII. 406). Soon, not a limitation but a total abolition of monarchical authority appeared as the true aim of these "sanctified hypocrites." Their violence disgraced the cause of liberty and was injurious to the nation: "It is seldom," Hume concluded, "that the people gain any thing by revolutions in government; because the new settlement, jealous and insecure, must commonly be supported with more expense and severity than the old: but on no occasion was the truth of this maxim more sensibly felt, than in the present situation of England. Complaints against the oppression of ship-money, against the tyranny of the Star Chamber, had roused the people to arms: and having gained a complete victory over the crown, they found themselves loaded with a multiplicity of taxes, formerly unknown; and scarcely an appearance of law and liberty remained in the administration" (VIII. 102).

So great were the alterations imposed forcibly on the constitution in this later period that Hume feels Charles I was essentially right in saying, "that he had been more an enemy to his people by these concessions, could he have prevented them, than by any other action of his life" (VIII. 110). Having violently pulled the government to pieces, the patriots of