Charles Bradford Bow (ed.). *Common Sense in the Scottish Enlightenment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. ix + 226. ISBN: 9780198783909. £50 Hdbk.

David Hume is today the best-known philosopher of eighteenth-century Scotland, but in the second half of the century North Britain’s universities were dominated by Common Sense Philosophy, an approach which was developed in opposition to Hume’s scepticism. The Scottish Common Sense philosophers were not a homogeneous group, but they essentially agreed that human beings can instinctively perceive truth independent of the will and without argumentation, habit or experience. This new essay collection, edited by Charles Bradford Bow, considers the historical and philosophical importance of Common Sense. The flagbearer of this school was Thomas Reid (1710-96), first a student at Marischal College and then a professor at King’s College, both Aberdeen, and later Adam Smith’s replacement at Glasgow University. The essays in *Common Sense in the Scottish Enlightenment* are written by both historians and philosophers, and because of my own orientation I will concentrate on the former in the bulk of this review.

Despite its obvious historical salience, the Common Sense school has not received as much scholarly attention as many other aspects of Scottish Enlightenment thought.[[1]](#footnote-1) As Paul Wood argues in his chapter in the volume, the relative neglect of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy among historians has meant that its genesis remains obscure (165). *Common Sense in the Scottish Enlightenment* certainly goes some way towards suggesting answers. The volume’s first essay looks at seventeenth-century anticipations of Common Sense within Scottish philosophy. Giovanni Gellera here argues that the Scottish scholastic response to Descartes’ epistemology is comparable to Reid’s response to Hume in the following century. The essay thus makes a case for a degree of continuity in Scottish philosophy from the mid-seventeenth century until Sir William Hamilton (1788-1856). Wood’s essay deals with how the early British readers of Reid and others sought to explain the birth of the ‘Scottish School’ and the emergence of the ‘New Empire of Common Sense’. The English Dissenter Joseph Priestley, for example, stressed the influence of Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames, Richard Price, and James Harris (1709-70), author of *Hermes: Or, a Philosophical Inquiry concerning Language and Universal Grammar* (1751). Wood also informs us that Joseph Berington, another Englishman, was the first who understood Common Sense as a Scottish school of thought (186).

Bow’s introduction is helpful for sketching the Aberdonian origins of Common Sense Philosophy. In 1758, the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, known as the ‘Wise Club’, was founded, and it became a key forum for the development of Common Sense (4). The club’s members included George Campbell, John Gregory, David Skene, Alexander Gerard, James Beattie and, most importantly, Reid. The main intellectual adversary for these men was undoubtedly Hume. Reid wrote to Hume in 1763: ‘If you write no more in morals politicks or metaphysicks, I am afraid we [in the club] shall be at a loss for Subjects’. Hume had by this stage finished his active writing career after the final instalment of the six-volume *History of England* was published at the end of 1761, and he spent the rest of his life revising his published writings. Hume did not include his first work, *A* *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), in his collected works, referring to it as a juvenile production. Despite this, it was the *Treatise* which was chiefly targeted by the Common Sense philosophers. Reid’s *Inquiry into the Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) was a response to it, as was Beattie’s *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770). Reid and Beattie are sometimes bundled together but the former’s engagement was more measured and respectful, reflected in his letter to Hume where he writes: ‘I have learned more from your writings [on the science of mind] than from all others put together’ (5). Beattie’s *Essay*, by contrast, notoriously reads more as an *ad hominem* attack on Hume. Wood’s chapter in the present volume, on the reception of the commons sense school in Britain, demonstrates the need to separate Reid from Beattie in this respect. Reid has been widely and correctly seen as the founder of the school and a first-rate philosopher, while Beattie merely a derivative thinker, a point also emphasized by Robin Mills in his chapter on Beattie in the book (see more below).

In his essay, Giovanni B. Grandi treats the ancestry of Reid’s *Inquiry* by looking at the author’s early manuscripts alongside accounts given by Dugald Stewart and John Fearn. Claire Etchegaray gives a clear sense of Reid’s originality and capabilities as a philosopher by looking at an undated and unpublished Reid manuscript entitled ‘Of Constitution’. ‘Constitution’ here refers to the constitution of the mind, and Reid engages with the question of the extent to which this may be observable. According to Reid, the mental constitution operates independently from divine intervention because of its fixed first principles of common sense. Etchegaray argues that Reid’s response to the sceptic did not rely on Cartesian subjectivism, but a naturalistic one which involved examining the nature of the mind, and this anatomy of the mind in turn paved the way for psychology (73-4).

Much of *Common Sense in the Scottish Enlightenment* is naturally concerned with the school’s engagement with Hume. Gordon Graham compares Reid’s Common Sense approach with Hume’s sentimentalist, and questions whether Reid should be considered a ‘moral realist’. In chapter five, Esther Engels Kroeker shows that Reid considered his moral philosophy as a response to the atheistic implications of Hume’s moral philosophy. But the volume’s most wide-ranging case for the central role of Hume in stimulating the emergence Scottish Common Sense Philosophy is James Harris’s chapter. Harris argues that the genesis of the Scottish Common Sense can be traced to the *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751) by Henry Home, later Lord Kames, which was intended to counter his friend Hume’s scepticism. The Common Sense responses to his works which Hume took most seriously were Reid’s *Inquiry* and especially Campbell’s *Dissertation on Miracles* (1762). Harris suggests that the key for Hume was that philosophy should be a source of polite conversations rather than violent disagreements. For this reason, Hume was deeply displeased with Beattie’s personal attacks on him. Although Harris’s chapter stresses that the Common Sense philosophers were not a monolithic group, he acknowledges that they shared the ancient view of philosophy as a discipline with practical consequences for everyday life (p. 154). For all of them, accordingly, Hume’s sceptical writings had dangerous implications which risked challenging religion and morality, though no one went further than Beattie in extending the defense of the latter to an attack Hume’s character. As indicated above, the Common Sense philosophers tended to focus their attacks on Hume’s *Treatise.* Harris argues that Hume in his later publications, especially in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)*,* sought to pre-empt accusations that his scepticism was destructive by emphasising that it was merely ‘academic’ and did not have any implications for ‘common life’. Hume’s scepticism was ‘subversive only of the kind of “metaphysics” that seeks, pointlessly, to transcend the domain of experience.’ (159).

Today Beattie is remembered primarily for his attacks on Hume’s and rarely considered on his own terms. Mills counters this tendency in his chapter where he demonstrates that Beattie became appointed as Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic at Marischal College solely thanks to his literaryabilities, and without having had either any training or prior interest in philosophy. According to Mills, Beattie’s motivation for writing his *Essay on Truth* was mainly to produce something suitable for his professorship. The *Essay* must be understood, however, against the backdrop of Beattie’s background in polite literature, Mills argues. The literary and popular style of the work turned it into one of the bestselling works in philosophy between 1770 and 1830 (127). Mills ultimately argues that Beattie should be understood as a critic of Reid rather than his populariser (at least within Aberdeen circles) since his approach and sources were so different.

The volume closes with an essay by the editor on the legacy of Common Sense in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The essay is almost entirely focused on Dugald Stewart, who became the main figure in sustaining this legacy after he succeeded Adam Ferguson as professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh University in 1785. In the decades following Stewart’s death in 1828, Common Sense was supplanted by Scottish Idealism and Utilitarianism (215). The reader is left wanting more on Sir William Hamilton, who published critical editions of Reid and Stewart, as well as the mid- to late-nineteenth century more broadly. Unfortunately, there are some minor slips in the treatment of nineteenth-century material. John Stuart Mill is listed as a ‘nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher’ in the introduction (13), which is not entirely accurate, even though of course his father, James Mill (n.b. *not* John Mill as it says on page 215), was Scottish. In total, however, the essays in *Common Sense in the Scottish Enlightenment* undoubtedly make a crucial contribution to our understanding of a comparatively neglected but highly significant aspect of what has become known as the Scottish Enlightenment.

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1. The interest has increased in recent years, however, and the collected works of Thomas Reid are currently being published by Edinburgh University Press with Knud Haakonssen as series editor. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)