

Review

The Correspondence of George Berkeley. Marc A. Hight, ed.
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In this edition of letters to and from George Berkeley, Marc A. Hight has made an immense contribution to the study of the various facets of this complex individual and his career. Editions of the correspondence of the last 150 years have been in one way or another incomplete. Alexander Campbell Fraser published letters and parts of letters to and from Berkeley, with a focus on the Berkeley Papers now held in the British Library.¹ Benjamin Rand published the correspondence of Berkeley and John Percival, Earl of Egmont.² A. A. Luce published only letters from Berkeley in vol. 8 of *The Works of George Berkeley*. Hight has taken the timely and necessary step of including all known correspondence to and from Berkeley in his volume, and therefore its scheme is the most comprehensive.

In the cumulative work of historical scholarship, one has the advantage of sitting on the shoulders of giants, yet (to mix allusions), even those giants sometimes nod. Hight corrects some basic mistakes and omissions by including letters simply passed over by Rand (such as letter 87, Percival to Berkeley, 25 July 1717), as well as other correspondence that he has discovered in his researches. The volume includes, by my own reckoning, eleven letters by Berkeley not in Luce, three of them never before published, in addition to the three new letters recently published by Hight, and five other letters published in earlier numbers of the *Berkeley Newsletter* (2-4) and elsewhere.³ One letter Hight published in 2010 (that from a George Berkeley to Robert Nelson) is now acknowledged not to be by the relevant George Berkeley (“Introduction,” xiv). The only other letter I am aware of that has been attributed to Berkeley’s correspondence, and which is not included in this volume, is that from Berkeley to Thomas McDonnell, referring to an intention to write an answer to a book called *Essay on Spirit*, published by David Berman.⁴

For those readers who have already worked with the previous editions of Berkeley’s letters, and the piecemeal publications of new letters since the Luce and Jessop *Works*, a brief discussion of those sources and grounds for any exclusions in the “Introduction” to this volume would have been helpful. A key to the list of letters, providing marks for those letters previously uncollected by Fraser, Rand or Luce might also have been a useful addition to the clear and economical introductory material.

¹ *The Life and Letters of George Berkeley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871).

² *Berkeley and Percival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914).

³ Hight’s note appears in *Berkeley Studies* 21 (2010), 16-21; David Berman, “Some New Bermuda Berkleiana,” *Hermathena* 110 (1970), 24-31 publishes a letter.

⁴ *Berkeley and Irish Philosophy* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 223.

Though any such attempt is necessarily selective, a review of this volume ought to give an indication of those aspects of Berkeley that are most evident in his correspondence (references are to letter numbers). To begin with matters of philosophy and natural philosophy, the reader is made aware of a lifelong interest in geology, astronomy and meteorology. This is often seen in open letters (intended for publication), right from the first letter (reprinted in editions of Berkeley's works as "Description of the Cave of Dunmore"), through accounts of volcanic eruptions, to late discussions of meteorological phenomena with Tom Prior (1, 89, 351, 362, 367). The most important addition to the corpus here is letter 2, to Hans Sloane, 11 June 1706, principally on the effects of gravity upon the form of the earth's atmosphere. The correspondence also demonstrates a lifelong concern with the theory and practice of political obligation and allegiance, often in discussions with Percival, and mostly relating to the individual's obligations to the state (6, 37, 73, 75). In later letters, the threat of a Jacobite invasion around 1745, and the duties of both Protestants and Catholics in such circumstances, prompt similar discussions, again often in open letters (323, 324). And, of course, Berkeley defends what have become his key philosophical arguments, concerning the non-existence of matter, the dualism of spirit and idea, the impossibility of abstract ideas, and the capacity of the mind to operate usefully without reference to clear and distinct ideas, in letters to Samuel Molyneux and Samuel Johnson in particular (9, 10, 18, 190, 194, 197, 199).

Beyond natural philosophy and philosophy, readers develop a strong sense of Berkeley's commitment to social projects of various kinds. Ireland is one chief area in which this concern is seen. There is a desire to protect Ireland from a punitive economic relationship with England, in a variety of different forms (as a tax on Irish yarn, letter 30). Berkeley clearly regarded his position in the Church as a social and economic as well as a religious mission, particularly during his Cloyne years (254, 263, 346). The scheme for founding a college on Bermuda, which, right from the start, in 1723, Berkeley acknowledges may make him seem "mad and chimerical" (p. 187), is ever-present in the correspondence for nearly a decade. The associated work of political lobbying, and questions of whether Berkeley should have left for America without his grant in hand, whether he should ask for a change in the grant to allow the college to be built in Rhode Island, and so on, are communicated clearly by the correspondence (117 onwards).

Despite the failure of the grant, one outcome of Berkeley's time in America was his sponsorship of American liberal education, through donations of books, land, and scholarships (199, 216, 253, 355, 357, 363). Several of Berkeley's correspondents, often implicitly responding to his own writings, relate the failure of the project for the college to the rise of infidelity and free-thinking at home, a tendency that must be combated (191, 258). Berkeley's social interests also encompass the cultural domain. As a traveller, in his two visits to France and Italy, he offers accounts of continental European landscape, culture, learning and economy (62, 65, 66, 85, 88), and his developing interest in architecture (110) and his later interest in music (289 onwards, particularly in the correspondence with Isaac Gervais) have roots in this period. Correspondence relating to tar water, which features frequently from letter 176 onwards, combines Berkeley's interests in social improvement, experimental or natural philosophy, and a form of philosophical therapeutics (a philosophical regime of living) that are all long-standing

concerns. Throughout all of these letters the impression of a committed individual, a person capable of deep and demanding friendship, an advocate of family life—at least once his early years of monkish retirement are past him (see letter 34)—is strong.

In reviewing such a useful and impressive volume it is ungenerous to quibble with minute aspects of the presentation of the text, but it is nonetheless the reviewer's lot to do so. Hight's policy for annotations seems to have focused on the clarification of the referents of proper names, in which he has been tireless. So, for example, in the annotations to letter 72, 18 individuals are identified unambiguously. Yet the annotations provide no clarification of the matter of this letter from Berkeley to Percival (the impeachment of Ormond for high treason as a result of his corresponding with the exiled Stuart court). The reader can find most of what is required to make basic sense of the letter in the back matter to the volume, in entries in Hight's excellent biographical and place register. But a little more annotation at the foot of the page on the substance of events described (what were the Dutch designs on Newport and Furnes, for example?) might make the volume easier to use and more approachable for the beginning doctoral student Hight identifies as the user he had in mind when preparing the annotations (xii).

When Hight does annotate more fully, he tends to focus on very specific issues. The longest annotations given in relation to Jacobitism in the early eighteenth century pertain directly to the situation at Trinity College, Dublin, such as the long note on the Forbes case accompanying letter 50 (Forbes was a student who had refused to drink a toast to King William). Whilst this case is clearly important, the level of detail provided here is not matched by other contextualizing annotation. (See also letter 68 for a similar focus on TCD at the expense of the broader political context.) Hight makes little reference to more recent (later 20th and 21st century) historical and contextual scholarship (see pp. 448, 531 for examples). The occasional presence of such citations makes the reader question why such material is not employed with reference to a broader range of historical and philosophical issues raised by the letters. But, however helpful a more developed body of annotation might have been, the preparation of such a text would have taken many, many years, and perhaps required a second volume for its publication. Few readers will regret the decisions Hight has made concerning the type and volume of annotation, as it has brought the text of the letters quickly and unobstructed into the public domain.

Hight also does a very good job of clarifying to which authors and texts Berkeley and correspondents are referring in their letters. Occasionally such references are vague, and Hight has to make conjectures. Sometimes other possibilities than those suggested by Hight may strike the reader. In letter 22, Berkeley to Percival, 20 December 1710, Berkeley is sympathizing with an old school acquaintance, Langton, who has been harangued by his parishioners for supposedly preaching passive obedience. Langton said he had copied his sermon from Dr. Scot (basing one's sermons on published texts was by no means an unusual phenomenon). Hight suggests this Scot is Patrick Scot, a clergyman writing between 1618 and 1625. It seems just as likely to me to be a reference to John Scott, a canon of St Paul's whose *Sermons on Several Occasions* was published in 1704. This same John Scott's *Christian Life* is included by Berkeley in a list of books to be sent to Harvard (letter 357), and it is a work from which he made selections for *The Ladies*

Library. That letter also suggests donating “the most approved writings of the divines of the Church of England” (as they are called in letter 355), including “Tillotson Sharp & Clarke.” Hight suggests that the text in question is Richard Clerke’s *Sermons* (1637), when Samuel Clarke’s *Sermons*, including those on the being and attributes of God, might be thought a stronger candidate. A copy of Clarke on the attributes from 1725 appears in the sale catalogue of Berkeley’s library, and Samuel Clarke appears in the gift of books Berkeley had earlier made to Yale.⁵ Earlier letters also demonstrate Berkeley’s attempt to draw Clarke into a dialogue on the subject of Berkeley’s early publications (letters 20, 23). Again, in letter 360, Berkeley to Percival, 3 December 1747, Berkeley commends Gilbert West’s *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*. He says there is also “another very well writ treatise of Mr Lyttleton’s,” and that Lyttelton and West “draw their pens in defence of Christianity” (p. 538). Hight notes that George Lyttelton published *A Letter to the Tories* in 1747, but in the same year, Lyttelton also published *Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul*. In a letter to Gilbert West, which seems more likely to be the work to which Berkeley is referring. But these points are minute when considered in the context of the work of annotating the volume as a whole.

Whilst, then, some readers might benefit from further contextual annotation of the letters, Hight has delivered the most comprehensive edition to date. Every student of Berkeley will be grateful for this edition, and for the diligence, accuracy, economy and energy with which Hight has executed his charge. This book puts the study of Berkeley, particularly from historical and contextual perspectives, on a surer footing than ever before.

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⁵ *A Catalogue of the Valuable Library of the late Right Rev. Dr. Berkeley, Lord Bishop of Cloyne. Together with the libraries of his Son and Grandson, the late Rev. George Berkeley, D.D. Prebendary of Canterbury, and the later George Monk Berkeley Esq. To be sold by Leigh and Sotheby, Monday June 6, 1796*, 33; and Andrew Keogh, “Bishop Berkeley’s Gift of Books in 1733,” *Yale University Library Gazette* 8:1 (July 1933), 1-25, esp. 21-22.