

THE BIOGRAPHY OF ADAM SMITH

James Buchan

The life of the philosopher Adam Smith offers small incident to the biographer. Smith passed much of his life in masculine institutions, such as Glasgow and Oxford Universities and the Scottish Customs Board. He came to London first in his late thirties, traveled abroad just once, to France and Geneva, and did not marry. His chief attachment was to his mother, whose death at a great age prostrated him. Yet this existence, which Smith once called “extremely uniform,” has come to fascinate our age. A trickle of biographical studies began to flow at the beginning of the twentieth century and in the past fifty years has become a river.

Smith stands at the point where history changes direction. During his lifetime, between 1723 and 1790, the failed kingdom of drink, the Bible, and the dagger that was old Scotland became a pioneer of the new sciences. God was dismissed from the lecture hall and the drawing room. The old medieval departments of learning disintegrated. Psychology became a study not of the soul but of the passions. Political economy was separated out of moral philosophy and began its progress to respectability and then hegemony. Smith was at the heart of those changes.

Because Smith did his thinking before the French Revolution of 1789 and the division of the political house into left and right, he appeals to both sides: on the left, to Tom Paine, Karl Marx, and Mary Wollstonecraft, on the right to Margaret Thatcher and every business club from Boston to Shanghai. The left Smithians like their hero’s devotion to the laboring poor and his contempt for colonialism, the right Smithians his scorn of big government. In the course of the twentieth century, as new biographical materials

turned up in the attics of Scottish country houses, each side looked for ammunition to launch at their political rivals.

From this battle, the economists held themselves aloof. Because, in the words of J. S. Mill, modern political economy concerns itself not with the whole of human nature but “only such phenomena of the social state as take place in consequence of the pursuit of wealth,” Smith’s adventures and exploits were to most economists as uninteresting as the events of any other single life. Even J. M. Keynes, who had a taste for biography, showed little curiosity about Smith’s life and times. The revolution in Smith’s biography since the publication of his lectures on jurisprudence in 1896 has proceeded without troubling the great mass of economists.

Above all, Smith’s life is intertwined with modern biography itself, as inaugurated by James Boswell in his *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* (1791). Boswell had been Smith’s pupil at Glasgow University and was entranced one day by a remark of Smith’s in lecture that, in the life of a great man, even the smallest detail is of interest. Yet efforts by some authors (including this one) to Boswellize Smith have, for dearth of evidence, been unsuccessful.

These are the facts of Smith’s life. Adam Smith was born in the early summer of 1723 in Kirkcaldy, a small port across the estuary or firth of the River Forth from Edinburgh, the ancient capital of Scotland. He was the son of Adam Smith, a commissioner of customs (who had died), and of Margaret Douglas. He was baptized on June 5, 1723. His birth date places him at the heart of a circle of Scotsmen known (since the early twentieth century) as the Scottish Enlightenment. A protégé of the philosophers Henry Home (b. 1696) and David Hume (1711), he was friend and colleague to the literary critic Hugh Blair (1718), the historian William Robertson (1721), the social philosopher Adam Ferguson (1723), and the natural scientists James Hutton (1726) and Joseph Black (1728).

Smith never knew his father, who had practiced as an attorney, supported the Union of the Scottish and English Parliaments in 1707, and was appointed comptroller of customs at Kirkcaldy in 1714. The family thus belonged to the “Whig” interest, supporters of the Protestant faith, a constitutional or limited monarchy under the House of Hanover, and political Union with England and

Wales. During Smith's lifetime, the Whigs triumphed over their principal rivals, the "Jacobites," adherents of the Roman Catholic House of Stuart and old notions of absolute or divine-right monarchy. Much of Scotland fell to a Jacobite insurrection in 1745 before the rebellion was broken up the following year.

From the age of seven, Adam attended the two-room Burgh School in the town (which survives as Kirkcaldy High School) and passed, in 1737, to the University of Glasgow as a stage on the way to Oxford. He was fourteen years old, an age then thought more than ripe for university. At that time, the merchants of Glasgow were beginning to prosper from trade with the British colonies across the Atlantic, including the tobacco states of Virginia and Maryland. At the college, Smith was exposed to several teachers of the first order, including the liberal philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), the mathematician Robert Simson (1687–1768), and the natural scientist Robert Dick (d. 1751).

Oxford, in contrast, which Adam Smith attended from 1740 on a forty-pound exhibition or bursary at Balliol College, left no discernible impression. Adam stayed without interruption from July 7, 1740, to August 15, 1746. There is no sign that he made friends at Oxford, and he commemorates not a single of his professors. Years later, in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Smith wrote of certain ancient universities as "sanctuaries in which exploded systems and obsolete prejudices found shelter and protection, after they had been hunted out of every other corner of the world" (WN V.i.f.34). That caused great offense among alumni of Oxford University, such as Dr. Samuel Johnson.

In August 1746, Smith rode back to Scotland. His bursary had destined him for the Episcopalian church, but according to his first biographer, the philosopher Dugald Stewart, Smith had no taste for the "ecclesiastical profession" for which he had been supported in his study. Scotland was still reverberating from the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. Edinburgh was under a cloud for surrendering to the rebels without firing a shot. Smith returned to Kirkcaldy and passes out of view.

He reappears in 1748, with his first published work, an unsigned preface to a collection of verses by a poet in Jacobite exile.

Later that year, under the patronage of the lawyer and philosopher Henry Home, he delivered a series of lectures on rhetoric and jurisprudence in the capital. The lectures, which brought him a hundred pounds (or as much as some college professors), he repeated over the next two winters. He made his most important friendship, with the philosopher David Hume. The popularity of the lectures ensured that when the chair of logic and rhetoric at Glasgow University fell vacant in late 1750, though he was but twenty-seven years old, Smith was elected. He then, in 1752, transferred to Francis Hutcheson's old chair of moral philosophy.

Smith was to spend thirteen years in Glasgow and later described those years "as by far the most useful, and therefore, as by far the happiest and most honourable period of my life" (Stewart V.10). At first, his mother kept house for him, and she was later helped by an unmarried cousin, Janet Douglas, of whom Smith became fond. He engaged himself in university business. In the intervals, he worked up his notes from his ethics course into the first of his two main philosophical works, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which was printed in London in April 1759.

It was a success, praised by David Hume and Edmund Burke, among others, ran through six British editions and one Irish printing in his lifetime, and was translated into French and German. Though eclipsed by the *Wealth of Nations* in the eighteenth century, and neglected by the nineteenth century, the *Theory* has enjoyed a revival.

The *Theory* ended with a promise, which Smith could not keep but never abjured, that he would provide in a forthcoming work a historical "account of the general principles of law and government . . . not only in what concerns justice, but in what concerns police, revenue, and arms, and whatever else is the object of law" (TMS VII.iv.37).

One consequence of the *Theory's* success was that Smith was asked to accompany as tutor a young nobleman, Henry, Duke of Buccleuch, on a tour of the European continent. The young man's family offered terms that few Scotsmen of that era would have refused: a salary of three hundred pounds per year, traveling expenses, and a pension of three hundred pounds for life. (For modern values, add two zeroes.) Though he was not required to do so,

Smith resigned his chair at Glasgow and set off for France with the seventeen-year-old duke in February 1764.

After a period of inaction in Toulouse, where Smith worked on his next book, they traveled to Geneva and met Voltaire, and then Paris where Smith proved an unlikely success in the salons. Armed with introductions from Hume, he met several philosophers interested in questions of commerce, banking, public credit, and agriculture, such as the tax farmer Claude-Adrien Helvétius, André Morellet, and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, who was to become controller general of French finances in the 1770s. He also consorted with a sect of agricultural theorists, led by the royal physician François Quesnay, known as the *économistes* or, nowadays, *physiocrates*.

This pleasant and productive life came to an end in October 1766, when the duke's younger brother, Hew, who had joined them, fell ill. Quesnay could not save the young man. In great dejection, the party returned to England in November. Smith spent six months in London, reading commercial texts and supervising a third edition of the *Theory*, which also contained a fair copy of one of his rhetoric lectures, "A Dissertation on the Origin of Languages." Smith then returned to his mother and Miss Douglas in Kirkcaldy, where he worked on what was to become the *Wealth of Nations*.

Distracted by a banking crisis in western Scotland, which affected the Buccleuch interests, and tension with the colonists in North America (where Smith supported colonial taxation), progress was slow. His friends despaired that Smith would ever complete what Boswell called his "Jurisprudence." Yet on March 9, 1776, in the midst of the crisis in America, there appeared in London in two volumes quarto *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, by Adam Smith, LL.D. and F.R.S. (Fellow of the Royal Society), Formerly Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow.

The work was a success. While some critics carped at the book's length and repetitions, or took issue with Smith's views on money and the corn trade, many recognized that Smith had broken new ground. Smith seemed to be laying foundations for a new style of government

based not on force, the royal prerogative, religious enthusiasm, or sectional interest but on the impulse of all free men and women “to better their condition.” The *Inquiry* was, as Burke put it, “a compleat analysis of society” in respect to not just arts and commerce, but finance, justice, police (public policy), “oeconomy of armies,” and public education. The book went through five London editions in Smith’s lifetime, and was also printed in Dublin and Philadelphia.

With his *Inquiry* out in the world, Smith could attend to his friend Hume, who was dying. Notorious for his skepticism in matters of religion, or “infidelity” as it was known, Hume died without recourse to clergy in August 1776. Even before his friend’s death, Smith was preparing an account of Hume’s last illness and of his calm and un-Christian demeanor in the face of extinction.

Smith’s eulogy of his friend, written in the form of a letter to their publisher William Strahan and dated from Kirkcaldy on November 9, 1776, cast Hume as a sort of modern Socrates, “approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit” (CAS 178). The letter infuriated the English Christians. Boswell, who under Dr. Johnson’s influence had turned against his old teacher, suggested Johnson “knock Hume’s and Smith’s heads together, and make an ostentatious infidelity exceedingly ridiculous.” Smith himself affected to be baffled that such a “very harmless Sheet of paper” had put the revolutionary message of the *Inquiry* in the shade (CAS 208).

Despite misgivings on the part of Smith, the *Letter* did not prevent his public employment. In 1777, death created a vacancy among the five commissioners of the Customs Board in Edinburgh, responsible for collecting duty on imported goods and suppressing smuggling in Scotland. Both the Treasury in London and the historian Edward Gibbon teased the philosopher for applying for so very modest a position. Now “affluent” if not rich on a salary of six hundred pounds per year, Smith tried to give up the Buccleuch annuity, but his pupil, who had more than absorbed *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, refused. (The present duke once told me that Smith had shaped the history of his family, turning it away from the temptations of London and back toward Scotland.)

Smith moved his mother, Miss Douglas, and his boy cousin and heir, David Douglas, to Panmure House, an old-fashioned building (which survives, much damaged) in the Canongate of Edinburgh. In the next twelve years, Adam became an institution of the Scots capital. As he walked each morning up High Street to the Custom House (which still stands), he was sketched by the barber turned caricaturist John Kay. In one of the pictures that were engraved, Smith is dressed in a coat, wig, and hat, a posy of flowers in his left hand against the stench of the Edinburgh High Street, his cane like an infantry musket at the right shoulder.

Smith had, as he told a French correspondent in 1785, “two other great works upon the anvil; the one is a sort of Philosophical History of all the different branches of Literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence; the other is a sort of theory and History of Law and Government. The materials of both are in a great measure collected, and some Part of both is put into tolerable good order. But the indolence of old age, tho’ I struggle violently against it, I feel coming fast upon me, and whether I shall ever be able to finish either is extremely uncertain” (CAS 248).

What leisure remained him from his four days a week at the Scottish Customs Smith employed instead in producing a new and cheaper edition of the *Wealth of Nations*. It appeared with the printer Strahan in 1784 and included a new section attacking the trade monopoly and government of the British East India Company in the subcontinent. Smith traveled twice in this period to London, where at some point he sat for the portrait medallion by James Tassie that can be seen (in two states) in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh. Later that year, he was appointed lord rector of his alma mater, the University of Glasgow. The deaths of his mother (May 23, 1784) and Janet Douglas (1788) left him desolate. His last work was a revision and expansion of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which was printed in early 1790.

As his end approached, Smith despaired of his literary legacy. Looking back on his life’s work, he found his masterpieces paltry. According to a visitor, he said, “I meant to have done more; and there are materials in my papers, of which I could have made a great deal. But that is now out of the question” (Stewart V.8n).

Some days before his death, probably Sunday, July 11, he asked one of his friends to burn most of his surviving papers, which was duly done in his presence. Smith died the Saturday following, July 17, 1790. His remains lie in the Canongate Kirkyard in Edinburgh.

The biography, as opposed to the life of Adam Smith, begins with a eulogy delivered by Dugald Stewart, the professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh, to the Royal Society of Edinburgh on two evenings, January 21 and March 18, 1793. The eulogy was published the following year in the Society's *Transactions* and then, in 1795, in an edition of seven small works that Smith had spared from the flames and given to the scientists Hutton and Black, his literary executors: *Essays on Philosophical Subjects by the Late Adam Smith, LL.D.* Stewart's eulogy was somewhat expanded in a new edition of 1811 and later.

Stewart is a frustrating biographer. He is constrained by the air of repression and even panic that followed the execution of Louis XVI of France in January 1793; by respect for the men and women of Smith's circle still living; and by a reticence all of his own. In a manuscript note he added to his copy of the *Essays*, Stewart says that "in the early part of Mr. Smith's life it is well known to his friends that he was for several years attached to a young lady of great beauty and accomplishment," without giving her a name or address, except to say that he himself had known her in her eighties.

In summarizing the *Wealth of Nations*, Stewart felt stifled (he wrote later) by the political atmosphere of 1793 where "the doctrine of a Free Trade was itself represented as of a revolutionary tendency." Stewart makes a minimum of Smith's French influences. He goes to great pains to quote a manuscript note by Smith (now lost), in which the philosopher claimed that he had the "leading principles" of his political economy as early as 1751, long before he traveled to France. Stewart steers well clear of Smith's religion, or such as there was of it.

Smith comes across as an innocent fellow and political economy as a harmless, technical sort of subject. "He was certainly not fitted for the general commerce of the world, or for the business of active

life,” Stewart told his auditors (Stewart V.12). Stewart made much of Smith’s absentmindedness in company, or what was then called “absence.” Edinburgh itself had been transformed into a modern city in the years since the 1745 rebellion, and the memoirists of the new “polite” Edinburgh, such as Henry Mackenzie and Sir Walter Scott, portrayed Smith as a half barbarous relic of the Old Town. Yet even then, his former pupils Boswell and John Millar, the future prime minister Lord Shelburne, and some of the Parisians recollected a more suave and commanding figure.

Stewart also set several hares racing, which his successors have endeavored to run down, long after they had passed under the hedge. What did Smith do or think in those six years at Oxford in the 1740s? What happened to those elements of his “Jurisprudence” lectures that did not make it into the *Wealth of Nations*? And what, precisely, were the manuscripts burned that day in Smith’s bedroom at Panmure House, except an “irreparable injury to letters” (Stewart V.8)?

For some time, little was added to Stewart’s account. The French Revolution cast a long shadow. William Playfair, in his edition of 1805, condensed Stewart’s biography and then digressed to absolve Smith from any influence from France. “There is no connection between Political Oeconomy,” Playfair wrote, “and free thinking in matters of religion; and with respect to equality, the division of labour, the basis of wealth, is an eternal bar to it.”

In the next three decades, free trade gained ground in Britain. The agitator Richard Cobden traveled “through the length and breadth of this country with Adam Smith in my hand to advocate the principles of free trade,” and in 1846 the British Parliament permitted the free import of grain. Yet there was little biographical curiosity. In the new editions of the *Wealth of Nations*, the editors—J. R. McCulloch, the professor of political economy at the University of London (1828), the colonial promoter and scoundrel E. G. Wakefield (1836), and Cobden’s disciple Thorold Rogers (1869)—printed Stewart’s biography with trivial additions and subtractions. In the dearth of biographical knowledge, the idea that Smith underwent some change of mental course

between *Theory* and *Inquiry* surfaced in Henry Buckle's *History of Civilisation* (London: 1861) and among political economists in Germany. The notion that Smith replaced fellow-feeling by self-interest as the basis of his social philosophy has proved impossible to eradicate.

Yet just as the last survivors of the eighteenth century went to their graves, the mid-Victorians began to admire the achievements of that century. Walter Bagehot, a country banker and the second editor of the *Economist* magazine, in an essay on Smith in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1876, took a new approach. He saw that the *Wealth of Nations*, whose centenary he was celebrating, was

in the mind of its author only one of many books, or rather a single part of a great book, which he intended to write. A vast scheme floated before him, much like the dream of the late Mr. Buckle as to a "History of Civilisation," and he spent his life accordingly, in studying the origin and progress of the sciences, the laws, the politics, and all the other aids and forces which have raised man from the savage to the civilized state. He wanted to trace not only the progress of the race, but also of the individual; he wanted to show how each man being born (as he thought) with few faculties, came to attain to many and great faculties. He wanted to answer the question, how did man—race or individual—come to be what he is?

In a word, wrote Bagehot, unable to resist the gag, Smith wanted to demonstrate how "from being a savage, man rose to become a Scotchman."

Bagehot was followed in 1895 by John Rae with a full biography, *Life of Adam Smith*. This work, while not discussing Smith's writings, included many anecdotes of Smith, and much circumstantial information. Its fault, as W. R. Scott put it in the 1930s, was that Smith himself was somehow "absorbed in the background, so that there is, in reality, no adequate explanation of the essential qualities of heart and mind" that produced the *Wealth of Nations*.

That year occurred the revolution in Smith's biography, when Edwin Cannan, of the London School of Economics, received from his friend, the attorney Charles Maconochie, a manuscript set of

lecture notes that Maconochie had found in 1876 in a garret of the family estate in West Lothian, Meadowbank House. Labeled on the front “Juris Prudence” and dated 1766, the notes appeared to Cannan to be a professional copyist’s version of Smith’s lectures of the winter of 1763–64.

Cannan set about reconstructing the rock or matrix from which the *Wealth of Nations* was cut. Noting that the lectures were delivered before Smith ever saw France, he judged that there was far more in the *Wealth of Nations* of Hutcheson than of Turgot. He also doubted whether the phantom third work on the principles of law and justice (mentioned at the end of the *Theory* and the 1785 letter) “ever consisted of very much more than those parts of the lectures on justice which were not incorporated in the *Wealth of Nations*.” That judgment holds to this day.

The Maconochie lectures were just the first to turn up. A second set, found by John M. Lothian at the auction of the contents of an Aberdeenshire country house in 1958, appeared to cover lectures from the previous winter of 1762–63. A third set, consisting of partial notes of the jurisprudence lectures one year in the 1750s and preserved by Smith’s Glasgow colleague John Anderson in his commonplace book, was published by R. L. Meek in 1976. In addition, notes of the lectures on rhetoric at Glasgow of 1762–63, bought by Lothian at the same Aberdeenshire country house sale in 1958, were published in 1963 as *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres Delivered in the University of Glasgow by Adam Smith. Reported by a Student in 1762–63* (London: 1963). Truly, the Scots never throw anything away.

Meanwhile, a hoard of James Boswell’s papers, first his letters to his friend William Temple in 1857 and then, in a flush after 1925, letters and journals from Malahide Castle, near Dublin, Ireland, and Fettercairn House, Kincardine, brought Smith’s age and circle to life. In the 1920s, W. R. Scott examined the archives of Glasgow University to reveal Smith as a conscientious administrator and “business man.” His book, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor*, appeared in a handsome edition in 1937 on the second centenary of Smith’s matriculation at Glasgow. Scott also found in the

Buccleuch papers an early draft of the *Wealth of Nations*, copied out in Glasgow and therefore before 1764, and two fragments on the division of labor. Beginning in 1894, James Bonar and others reconstructed the library Smith had installed at Panmure House. The most important pieces of furniture from Panmure House were identified and located.

After World War II, and the vogue for nationalized industry and state welfare systems, Smith's reputation entered a sort of recession. Nonetheless, knowledge of eighteenth-century Scotland continued to expand, most notably through E. C. Mossner's biography of Hume and the work of North American scholars, such as Richard B. Sher, on the eighteenth-century book trade and the Scottish Presbyterian church or Kirk. The great revival in Smith's influence, evident in the House of Commons and the US Congress after 1979, was presaged by the publication of the bicentenary Glasgow Edition of all of Smith's works, his lectures and his letters, in 1976.

In the sheds and outbuildings of that great scholarly edifice, the editors Campbell and Skinner (London: 1982) and D. D. Raphael (Oxford: 1985) put their hands to biography. Raphael made a point that now seems obvious. Both *Theory* and *Inquiry* are littered with passages that show how much Smith went out into the world. He had watched greyhounds course a hare and people twist and turn their bodies in sympathy to keep aloft a dancer on a slack rope. The main biographical effort of the Glasgow editors was that of the Canadian scholar, I. S. Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith* (Oxford: 1995). In *Adam Smith and the Pursuit of Perfect Liberty* (2006: in the United States *The Authentic Adam Smith*), this author, drawing on fugitive passages in Smith's own writings and those of Boswell and other memoirists, emphasized Smith's despondency and found its source in his orphan condition. That approach has found small echo in the learned world.

That leaves the most recent biography to hand, Nicholas Phillipson's *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (2010). Phillipson's chronology is distinctive. For Phillipson, Smith was reading Epicurus in the schoolhouse in Kirkcaldy at age thirteen and had the rudiments of the division of labor and commercial liberty by the

late 1740s. Phillipson devotes a “conjectural” chapter to reconstructing lectures on jurisprudence that, on the evidence of the passage in Stewart quoted above, Smith seems to have delivered in Edinburgh in the winter of 1750–51. One effect of this chronology is that Phillipson’s Smith has done all his important thinking by his thirties, leaving more leisure than many imagined for university business, the Scottish Customs, advice to ministers in London, and the management of the Buccleuch estates. From all we know of how lives unfolded in the eighteenth century, that sounds spot-on.

Phillipson’s Smith is “tough-minded” and “ambitious.” Far from being the unworldly chap of Stewart or an economist of modern character and habits, Phillipson’s Smith passed a long life wrestling with a stupendous theory of everything. Phillipson calls this project the science of man, in which introspection in the manner pioneered by David Hume and a profound study of ancient and modern history lay bare the principles of social organization, the well-springs of the arts and sciences, and the ideal government and code of laws. Such an enterprise, ambitious even in antiquity, was in the wide world of the eighteenth century excessively so. No doubt that is why Smith felt that he had failed.

It is now accepted by all but the dyed-in-the-wool “Hidden Hand” ideologues that Smith’s legacy is a vast ruin field of thought, a sort of Palmyra or Persepolis, in which two monumental columns survive erect and intact amid stones half achieved or half demolished. It is one of the sights of philosophy and, as the old Michelin tourist guides used to say, merits the detour.

It is hard to imagine that there is much to add to Phillipson, but that is also what the Victorians had to say about Stewart, and they were wrong. There may yet be, in some attic or linen press in one of the Buccleuch houses or some edition of Aristotle rattling around in the secondhand book trade, old notes or letters that might unblock a window onto the life of Adam Smith. We need to know more about the period in France. (An Edinburgh bookseller told W. R. Scott that he had sold a travel diary in Smith’s hand, but had forgotten to whom, the ninny.) Phillipson calls for a redoubled effort: “There is still biographical work to be done.”

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

As detailed above, key biographical studies of Smith include Dugald Stewart, *Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D* (1793), now republished in the Glasgow Edition volume of EPS; Walter Bagehot, “Adam Smith as a Person” (1876), available in vol. 7 of *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot* (London: 1915); John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* (London: 1895); Ian S. Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: 2010); and Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (London: 2010).