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The Writings of Adam Smith

by Julio H. Cole

Two centuries after his death in 1790, Adam Smith is still justly regarded as the single most towering figure in the history of modern economics. His celebrated work on *The Wealth of Nations* captured the spirit of industrial capitalism, and presented its theoretical rationale in a form which dominated the thinking of the most influential political economists of the 19th century and which continues to inspire free market advocates to this day.

However, though few people would question the importance of Adam Smith for the history of economics, it is also important to realize that he was not merely (or even primarily) an economist—the field had not yet developed into an independent discipline in his time—and he himself regarded his *Wealth* as only a partial exposition of a much larger work on “the general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions they have undergone in the different ages and periods of society,” which he hoped to write but never completed in his lifetime. Moreover, even in *The Wealth of Nations* it is evident that Smith’s conception of economic science encompassed much more than today’s “core” fields of price theory, production and distribution, money and banking, public finance, international trade, and economic growth, each of which is regarded today as a specialty in itself. These topics are of course discussed at length in Smith’s book, but it also includes detailed excursions into fields as diverse as ecclesiastical history, demographics, educational policy, military science, agriculture, and colonial affairs. Indeed, the sheer

catholicity of his interests, embracing not only economics, ethics, political philosophy, and jurisprudence, but also literature (ancient and modern), linguistics, psychology, and the history of science, must seem staggering to the modern specialist, but no less staggering is the analytical depth which he applied in all his studies.

Early Life

Adam Smith was born in 1723 in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, the posthumous son (by a second marriage) of Adam Smith, comptroller of customs, and Margaret Douglas. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but he was baptized on June 5, 1723, and this date is often mistakenly taken as his birthdate. Little is known about his childhood, except that at the age of 4 he was kidnapped by a band of Gypsies, though prompt action by his uncle soon effected his rescue. “He would have made, I fear, a poor Gypsy,” commented John Rae, his main biographer. Apart from this incident, Smith’s life was singularly quiet and uneventful, and his story is essentially that of his studies and his books.¹

In 1737, at the age of 14, having finished his term at the Kirkcaldy Grammar School, Smith entered the University of Glasgow, whereupon he came under the strong influence of “the never to be forgotten” Francis Hutcheson, the famous professor of moral philosophy. Upon his graduation in 1740, Smith won an important scholarship (the Snell Exhibition) to Oxford, studying for six years in Balliol College. However, the intellectual atmosphere at Oxford at the time was lax and disappointing (“. . . the greater part of the public professors [at Oxford] have . . . given up altogether

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even the pretence of teaching,” and “. . . it will be his own fault if anyone should endanger his health at Oxford by excessive study. . . .”).² These years were devoted largely to a program of self-education in which he read widely in both classical and modern literature and philosophy.

Returning to his mother's home in 1746, Smith cast about for suitable employment, and meanwhile continued his studies. In 1748 he went to Edinburgh, where, under the sponsorship of Lord Henry Kames, he gave for three years a series of public lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres. In 1751, on the basis of this performance, he was called to his own University of Glasgow, first as professor of logic, and shortly after as professor of moral philosophy. The latter position he held for 12 years, a time which he later described as “by far the most useful, and therefore by far the happiest and most honorable period of my life.”

His course was divided into four parts: natural theology, ethics, jurisprudence, and political economy. In 1759 he published his first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which embodied the second portion of his course, and which almost immediately established his scholarly reputation. In 1761 he published an essay on “The First Formation of Languages” which was included as an appendix in later editions of the *Moral Sentiments* (six editions were published during Smith's lifetime).

In 1763 Charles Townshend offered Smith a lifetime pension in return for acting as tutor to his stepson, the Duke of Buccleuch, on a three-year tour of France. Smith thus gave up his professorship and embarked on his only trip abroad, in the course of which he met Voltaire in Geneva, and associated with Turgot, Quesnay, and other French *encyclopedistes* during his stay in Paris. In 1766 the sudden illness and death of Hew Scott, the Duke's younger brother, also in Smith's charge, cut short the continental sojourn and forced a hasty return to England.

The Wealth of Nations

For the next seven years Smith lived with his mother at Kirkcaldy, and devoted most of his time to his *Wealth of Nations*. This period too he described as a happy one (“I was never, perhaps, more [happy] in all my life.”) In 1773 he traveled to London, taking his manuscript with him, and

apparently fearful for his health, named his friend David Hume as his literary executor, with instructions to publish in the event of his death his early essay on the “History of Astronomy,” which was apparently part of an earlier grand project of “a history of the liberal sciences and elegant arts.” (As it turned out, however, Hume died first, in 1776.)

For the next five years he lived in London, and his close friends included Edward Gibbon and Edmund Burke. In March 1776 *The Wealth of Nations* was published and was an immediate and lasting success: the first edition was exhausted in six months, and in Smith's lifetime the book went through five editions (1776, 1778, 1784, 1786, and 1789). Also, within three decades it had been translated into at least six foreign languages: Danish (1779-80), three French versions (1781, 1790, and 1802), German (1776-78), Italian (1780), Spanish (1794), and Russian (1802-06).

The only other work published by Smith in his lifetime, apart from two articles on literary subjects written for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1755, was his “Letter to [William] Strahan” on the death of David Hume.³ His unqualified praise of his dear friend's moral qualities raised a storm of protest throughout Britain. As Smith was later to note: “A single, and . . . very harmless sheet of paper . . . brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain.”

In 1778 Smith was appointed Commissioner of Customs for Scotland, and held that post until his death, dwelling with his mother and his cousin, Miss Janet Douglas, in Edinburgh. In 1787 Smith was elected Lord Rector of Glasgow University, and served until 1789. On July 17, 1790, full of honors and recognition, Smith died at the age of 67.

Prior to his death, Smith had ordered the destruction of most of his unpublished manuscripts, among which were probably his lectures on natural religion and jurisprudence, and his early lectures on rhetoric. Most of this material was thus probably lost forever, though part of it has since been recovered indirectly in the form of students' notes taken in the early 1760s.

In 1795, Smith's literary executors, Joseph Black and James Hutton, edited and published a collection of *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, which included the aforementioned essay on the history of astronomy. The most well-known modern edition

of these essays is that by J. R. Lindgren (ed.), *The Early Writings of Adam Smith* (New York: Kelley, 1967), which also includes the essay on the formation of languages.

Lecture Notes

The story of Smith's writings does not end here, however. In 1895, Professor Edwin Cannan was alerted to the existence, in the hands of an Edinburgh lawyer, of a manuscript which he identified as the lecture notes, taken by a student, of a course on jurisprudence delivered by Smith some time before his French voyage. (Later scholars have established that the lectures were delivered in the portion of the 1763-64 session which preceded Smith's departure.) Cannan edited these notes and published them as *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms, delivered in the University of Glasgow by Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896).

In 1929, the Clements Library of the University of Michigan acquired a collection of papers which had belonged to Alexander Wedderburn, among which was an item which Professor G. H. Guttridge identified as a memorandum on the "American problem" written by Smith in 1778. This material was edited by Guttridge and published in the *American Historical Review*, 38 (1933), pp. 714-20.

Finally, two additional sets of student notes were discovered by Professor John M. Lothian in 1958. One of these related to Smith's course of lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres, as delivered at Glasgow in the 1762-63 session. These notes were edited by Lothian and published as *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (London: Nelson, 1963). The second set of notes, relating to Smith's course on jurisprudence as delivered in the same session, was not published until 1978, as part of the

Glasgow Edition of the Works of Adam Smith.

In our age of over-specialization, no one can help but be impressed by the range and depth of Smith's scholarship, a truly great embodiment of the spirit of the Scottish enlightenment. However, much as we must admire his many accomplishments in so many fields, there is no denying that posterity has chosen to remember him mainly for his contributions to economics, and his fame will always rest foremost on his masterpiece, *The Wealth of Nations*. Though written in English in the 18th century, it now belongs to the world and to all times. Smith took economics forever beyond the narrow mercantilistic framework which denied the gains from trade between nations, and made of it a study of the spontaneous and largely unintended social order which arises from free exchanges between individuals, exchanges which produce benefits for all parties involved, whether domestic or foreign. For as long as the love of liberty survives in this world, free men will continue to derive inspiration from Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*. □

1. John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1895; reprinted, New York: Kelley, 1965), p. 5. See also William R. Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor* (Glasgow: Jackson & Son, 1937), pp. 22-25. These two books are still the standard sources of biographical information on Smith's life. A good modern biography is that of E. G. West, *Adam Smith: The Man and His Works* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1976).

2. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Cannan edition (New York: Modern Library, 1937), p. 718, and *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross, eds., (Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 1.

3. First published in 1777, and subsequently reprinted in most editions of Hume's *Essays*, most recently in *Essays—Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), pp. xliii-xlix.

Editors' Note: Professor Cole has prepared a layman's guide to the scholarly literature surrounding the work of Adam Smith. If you would like a copy, please contact The Foundation.