



## Foreword to “Glimpses of Adam Smith”

On May 21, 2015, Ian Simpson Ross passed away in Vancouver at the age of 84. A tender, informative notice in *Herald Scotland* (1 June 2015), by Harry McGrath ([link](#)), says that Ross “was a Scots-born academic, lecturer and writer who became Professor Emeritus of English at the University of British Columbia. He was also the author of the much-lauded *Life of Adam Smith*, which was the first full-scale biography of Smith in a century when it was published in 1995.” Ross was a student of Ernest Mossner, who enlisted Ross to co-edit, with Mossner, Adam Smith’s correspondence, for the Glasgow Edition of Smith’s works published by Oxford University Press and later reprinted by Liberty Fund. Ross’s *The Life of Adam Smith* (Oxford University Press, 1995, 2nd ed. 2010) is one of the great biographies of Adam Smith, and by far the longest, consisting of 589 rather dense pages. It is meticulously packed with detail. Here we present selections from the second edition (2010), enumerated with Roman numerals. In reproducing material, we have sometimes inserted information to provide context; since Ross himself sometimes used brackets [like these], we instead use braces {like these}. Omitted intermittent material is replaced with an ellipsis. All of the ellipses in what follows are our insertions, except those that appear inside the quotations of Smith within excerpts I and XXVI, which are Ross’s own ellipses. We have retained Ross’s footnotes and in-line citations (but reformatting them, and in a few cases correcting, clarifying, or adding them), collecting the published sources cited in a References section that appears at the end of this article (archival sources used by Ross are not listed in the References here, but details on those can be found in the book).

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# Glimpses of Adam Smith: Excerpts from the Biography by Ian Simpson Ross<sup>1</sup>

Ian Simpson Ross

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

## I. (p. 22)

In January 1736 {Adam Smith at the time being 12 years old} there was excitement over the apprehension of the ‘free-trader’ Andrew Wilson, who had attempted to recoup his smuggling losses by robbing an excise collector at nearby Pittenweem. Subsequently he failed in an attempt to escape from the Tolbooth in Edinburgh, and tried again to escape during morning service in the Tolbooth Kirk, a scene witnessed by Smith’s friend, Alexander Carlyle. At Wilson’s execution, Captain Porteous of the Edinburgh City Guard ordered his men to fire on the mob. When Porteous was pardoned by the Government for this crime, a disciplined mob, said to have included many men from Fife, seized him on the night of 7 September 1736 and hanged him at the scene of Wilson’s death, showing their detestation of the revenue system Wilson fought, and their utter defiance of official authority (Scott 1818, ch. vii; Carlyle 1973, 18–20; Roughead 1909). In *WN*, Smith considers the lot of the smuggler with some sympathy and understanding, representing him as a ‘person who, though no doubt highly blameable for violating the laws of his country, is frequently incapable of violating those of natural justice, and would have been, in every respect, an excellent citizen, had not the laws of his country made that a crime which nature never meant to be so’. We might think that the fate of Alexander Wilson fits precisely what Smith paints as typical of the smuggler: someone who ‘from being at first, perhaps, rather imprudent than

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1. *Econ Journal Watch* gratefully acknowledges Oxford University Press for its grant of permission to reprint these excerpts from *The Life of Adam Smith*, 2nd ed., 2010 ([link](#)).

criminal...at last too often becomes one of the hardiest and most determined violators of the laws of society' (V.ii.k.64).

## II. (p. 52)

Regarding {Francis} Hutcheson's teaching of politics as part of the moral philosophy course, an inspiration for Smith must have been his professor's stress on the 'Old Whig' and civic humanist theme of the importance of civil and religious liberty for human happiness:

as a warm love of liberty, and manly zeal for promoting it, were ruling principles in his {that is, Hutcheson's} own breast, he always insisted upon it at great length, and with the greatest strength of argument and earnestness of persuasion: and he had such success on this important point, that few, if any, of his pupils, whatever contrary prejudices they might bring along with them, ever left him without favourable notions of that side of the question which he espoused and defended. (Leechman 1755, xxxv–xxxvi)

Smith seems to have absorbed his teacher's arguments for economic and political liberty, as we shall see, but he never pushed them as far as Hutcheson.

## III. (pp. 114–115)

The teaching of moral philosophy was at the core of the Scottish university education of Smith's time, and of the Scottish Enlightenment as a movement, as much recent scholarship has demonstrated (Stewart-Robertson 1983; Emerson 1990; Sher 1990; Wood 1990; Haakonssen 1996). Though there was a measure of philosophical and religious freedom and diversity in Scotland, the kirk could still exercise control over appointments, as Hume's failure to get a Chair at Edinburgh and Glasgow illustrates. But absent from the Scottish academic scene were the monolithic tendencies in the state-administered universities of absolutist Protestant Germany, for example, Jena, Leipzig, Halle, and, from 1737, Göttingen (Nissen 1989). Men of letters were certainly supported in these institutions, as *WN* notes (V.i.g.39), but they faced political and religious restrictions, and also, for many decades, the intellectual stranglehold of Christian Wolff's philosophy (Boyle 1992, 17–18).

The Glasgow tradition of a broad approach to moral philosophy went back to the sixteenth century, when in the early decades John Mair taught the *Ethics of Aristotle*, publishing an edition of this text in 1530, as well as taking up economic issues in lectures on the Sentences of Peter Lombard. In addition, Andrew Melville

and his nephew James Melville in the 1570s taught the moral philosophy of Aristotle (Durkan and Kirk 1977, 158, 279). Gershom Carmichael and Hutcheson had broken away from neo-Aristotelianism to introduce, between them, the natural-law tradition of {Hugo} Grotius and {Samuel} Pufendorf, Stoic ethics, and Shaftesbury's philosophy of benevolence and moral sense. The distribution of {Thomas} Craigie's duties, in which Smith participated, indicated the range—and liberal nature—of the public course in moral philosophy at Glasgow by 1751.

#### IV. (p. 116)

Orthodox religious opinion was not impressed by Smith's handling of the first part of his course, a state of affairs reflected in the comments of the anecdotalist John Ramsay of Ochertyre:

[Smith's] speculations upon natural religion, though not extended to any great length, were no less flattering to human pride than those of Hutcheson. From both the one and the other presumptuous striplings took upon themselves to draw an unwarranted conclusion—namely, that the great truths of theology, together with the duties which man owes of God and his neighbours, may be discovered by the light of nature without any special revelation.

Ramsay also mentioned that doubts were entertained about the soundness of Smith's principles, in view of the company he kept, an allusion to his friendship with Hume. Smith was also described as being 'very guarded in conversation', and Ramsay noted that he seemed to find it disagreeable to pray in public when opening his class, also that he petitioned unsuccessfully to be excused from this duty. The prayer he offered 'savoured strongly of natural religion', and it was further reported that Smith gave up Hutcheson's practice of convening the moral philosophy class on Sundays for an improving discourse (Ramsay 1888, i.461–462).

#### V. (pp. 124–125)

{John} Millar also noted in Smith that crucial interest in his subject which 'never failed to interest his hearers'. Very likely recalling the ethics or jurisprudence courses he attended, Millar described a characteristic pattern of organization which seems to reflect Smith's account of 'didactic eloquence' (*LRBL*, ii.125–126), also a love of paradox which Smith claimed in his 'History of Astronomy' (iv.34) was 'so natural to the learned':

Each discourse consisted commonly of several distinct propositions, which [Smith] successively endeavoured to prove and illustrate. These propositions, when announced in general terms, had, from their extent, not unfrequently something of the air of a paradox. In his attempts to explain them, he often appeared, at first, not to be sufficiently possessed of the subject, and spoke with some hesitation. As he advanced, however, the matter seemed to crowd upon him, his manner became warm and animated, and his expression easy and fluent. In points susceptible of controversy, you could easily discern, that he secretly conceived an opposition to his opinions, and that he was led upon this account to support them with greater energy and vehemence. By the fulness and variety of his illustrations, the subject gradually swelled in his hands, and acquired a dimension which, without a tedious repetition of the same views, was calculated to seize the attention of his audience, and to afford them pleasure, as well as instruction, in following the same object, through all the diversity of shades and aspects in which it was presented, and afterwards in tracing it backwards to that original proposition or general truth from which this beautiful train of speculation had proceeded. (Millar, quoted in Stewart 1980/1793, I.21)

We might think of Smith expounding his ethical doctrine concerning the objects of reward and punishment in this fashion, or the economic one of free trade (on 6 April 1763, for example, see *LJ(A)* vi.87). There could be added to this picture in our mind's eye details of Smith's reliance on signs of the sympathy or lack of it of a selected hearer for gauging the effect of what he was saying. Smith described his practice thus to Archibald Alison the elder, an Edinburgh magistrate and Lord Provost:

During one whole session a certain student with a plain but expressive countenance was of great use to me in judging of my success. He sat conspicuously in front of a pillar: I had him constantly under my eye. If he leant forward to listen all was right, and I knew that I had the ear of my class; but if he leant back in an attitude of listlessness I felt at once that all was wrong, and that I must change either the subject or the style of my address.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, all the contemporary reports we have suggest that Adam Smith found the best situation for his abilities as a professor at Glasgow. His years of study, and preliminary experience as a lecturer at Edinburgh, came to fruition in excellent and appreciated teaching of seminal ideas. Of particular significance was his growing sophistication of economic analysis in the jurisprudence lectures, as he extended the natural-law tradition of Grotius and Pufendorf, relayed through Carmichael

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2. Anecdote told by Smith's student Archibald Alison to Archdeacon John Sinclair, reported by him (1875, 9).

and Hutcheson, in discussing value and exchange, and added his perspective to the comparative vision of Montesquieu and Hume concerning social and institutional transformation. It must indeed have been inspiring for his students to hear Smith expound his views on the dynamics of the creation of civil society and the alteration of values in its successive stages.

#### VI. (p. 160)

An anecdotal obituary of Smith in the *St James's Chronicle* (31 July 1790) recorded that he took {Charles} Townshend on a tour of manufactures in Glasgow, and they visited a tannery.... Smith fell into the pit—a noisome pool containing fat from hides, lime, and the gas generated by the mixture. He was dragged out, stripped, covered in blankets, placed in a sedan chair, and sent home.... The anecdote alleges that he was ‘talking warmly on his favourite subject, the division of labour’, and forgot the dangerous nature of the ground on which he stood.

#### VII. (p. 162)

Regarding Smith’s influence at this time, his former pupil and colleague, John Millar, testified as follows: ‘those branches of science which [Smith] taught became fashionable at [Glasgow], and his opinions were the chief topics of discussion in clubs and literary societies. Even the small peculiarities in his pronunciation or manner of speaking, became frequently the objects of imitation’ (Millar, quoted in Stewart 1980/1793, I.22).

#### VIII. (p. 178)

Smith...finds the same outlook in the black people of the coast of Africa, suggesting that their magnanimity far exceeds any conception of their ‘sordid’ slave-masters. His indignation then flashes out against the enslavement of these people by the Europeans:

Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they came from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished. (*TMS* 1759, 398; 1790, V.2.9)

It is to be hoped that the withers were wrung of readers in Glasgow and elsewhere engaged in business ventures profiting from slavery, and no doubt Smith as a moralist was helping to build the case of the anti-slavery movement.

**IX. (p. 224)**

Smith...felt that Hume should not publish anything about it {Rousseau's quarrelsomeness toward Hume}. Smith begins a letter to Hume, then in London, on 6 July by teasing him that he is as 'great a Rascal' as Rousseau, then continues with characteristically prudent advice not to 'unmask before the Public this hypocritical Pedant'...

**X. (p. 240)**

While in London, Smith moved in the same social circle that welcomed David Hume.... One of Hume's and Smith's hostesses of this period was Lady Mary Coke.... She kept a lively journal of her life, and her entry for Sunday 8 February 1767 paints Smith in a characteristic domestic scene:

While Lady George Lennox was with me Sir Gilbert Elliot came in: they talked of Mr Smith, the Gentleman that went abroad with the Duke of Buccleugh, I said many things in his praise, but added he was the most Absent Man that ever was. Lady George gave us an instance that made me laugh. Mr Damer [son of Lord Milton, who married the sculptress, Anne Conway, encouraged by Hume] She said, made him a visit the other morning as he was going to breakfast, and falling into discourse, Mr Smith took a piece of bread and butter, which, after he rolled round and round, he put into the teapot and pour'd the water upon it; some time after he poured it into a cup, and when he had tasted it, he said it was the worst tea he had ever met with. (Coke 1889, 141)

**XI. (p. 243)**

Smith explained his situation in Kirkcaldy thus to Hume: 'My Business here is Study in which I have been very deeply engaged for about a month past. My Amusements are long, solitary walks by the Sea side. You may judge how I spend my time. I feel myself, however, extremely happy, comfortable and contented. I never was, perhaps, more so in all my life'.

The letter ends with requests for information about Rousseau's activities: 'Has he gone abroad, because he cannot get himself sufficiently persecuted in Great Britain?'

**XII. (pp. 250–251)**

One anecdote has it that in his study in his mother's home in Kirkcaldy Smith dictated sections of *WN* to an amanuensis, either Reid or Gillies perhaps. He did so standing and had the curious habit of rubbing his head against the wall above the chimney-piece. This is supposed to have left a mark on the wall from the pomatum of his wig, and the reporter of this anecdote, Robert Chambers, alleged in his *Picture of Scotland* (1827) that the traces remained until the wall was repainted.

**XIII. (p. 254)**

As this state of affairs was protracted his health seems to have suffered, and he fought against this by going on long walks. Also, it is reported that he took up swimming again in the Firth of Forth. This pursuit very likely gave rise to the anecdote of his arriving in Dunfermline in his dressing gown, one Sunday morning as the bells were ringing and people were going to the kirk. He may have walked the fifteen miles from Kirkcaldy in a fit of abstraction, perhaps upon taking a wrong turning after a douse in the North Sea (Scott 1937, 325 n.1; Rae 1965, 259–260).

**XIV. (p. 257)**

...Hume on returning to Scotland in 1769 sought to draw his friend into some relaxation and refreshing companionship. On 20 August, he wrote to Smith that he was 'glad to have come within sight' of him by having a view of Kirkcaldy from his window in James's Court, but he also wished to be on speaking terms, and since he declared himself to be as tired of travelling as Smith 'ought naturally to be, of staying at home', he suggested that Smith should come to join him in his 'Solitude' in Edinburgh:

I want to know what you have been doing, and propose to exact a rigorous Account of the method, in which you have been employed yourself during your Retreat. I am positive you are in the wrong in many of your Speculations, especially where you have the Misfortune to differ from me. All these are Reasons for our meeting, and I wish you would make me some reasonable Proposal for the Purpose.



He then pointed out that there was the island of Inchkeith in the ‘great Gulph’ that lay between them, but it was uninhabited otherwise he would challenge Smith to meet him there, and ‘neither [of] us ever to leave the Place, till we were fully agreed on all points of Controversy’ (*Corr.*, No. 121).

**XV. (p. 258)**

Writing on 28 January 1772, Hume mentions a promise from Smith to visit him at Christmas, whose performance he had not ‘challenged’ because his sister Katherine, who lived with him and of whom he was very fond, had fallen ‘dangerously ill of a Fever’. She has now recovered and Hume looks for Smith’s ‘Company’, teasing him about his pleas of ill health:

I shall not take any Excuse from your own State of Health, which I suppose only a Subterfuges invented by Indolence and Love of Solitude. Indeed, my Dear Smith, if you continue to hearken to Complaints of this Nature, you will cut Yourself out entirely from human Society, to the great Loss of both Parties. (*Corr.*, No. 129)

**XVI. (p. 262)**

Smith and Hume labored the point of the solitude of Kirkcaldy, perhaps dwelling on a Rousseauistic theme, but Smith had the companionship of his cousin Janet Douglas and his mother, both women of character who were well connected with the Fife gentry, and there were neighbours such as Robert Beatson of Vicars Grange, who were certainly capable of instructive conversation about economics (*Corr.*, No. 266). Also, there is a report that during his evening walks along the Kirkcaldy foreshore, Smith had the company of a blind boy from the neighbourhood, Henry Moyes, who displayed great intellectual ability. Smith adopted the role of teacher of this boy, and sent him on to Hume, who secured a bursary for him at Edinburgh University, thus paving the way for a notable career as a popular lecturer on chemistry and the philosophy of natural history (Viner 1965, 74–77).

**XVII. (p. 268)**

On 14 September 1779, Boswell confided in his Journal: ‘Since [Smith’s] absurd eulogium on Hume, and his ignorant, ungrateful attack on the English Uni-

versity education, I have no desire to be much with him. Yet I do not forget that he was very civil to me at Glasgow' (Middendorf 1961; Boswell 1976, xc–xcii).

**XVIII. (pp. 272–273)**

There is circumstantial evidence that {Smith} was often in {Benjamin} Franklin's company at this time, and even that he showed chapters of *WN* to him (see Viner 1965, 44–47). This is not impossible. ... Certainly, Smith and Franklin had views in common. The theory of free trade is to be found in an unsystematic way in the economic writings of Franklin, and Smith shared the American's vision of an incorporating political union to end the disputes between their respective countries. Franklin left London in March 1775 to begin his career as one of the founding fathers of revolutionary America. This included taking a hand in drafting the Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776, four months after Smith had struck his blow for economic independence with the publication of *WN*.

**XIX. (p. 306)**

Another of the literati who congratulated Smith was {William} Robertson the historian, writing on 8 April to give his views on *WN*. Like {Hugh} Blair, he commented on Smith's achievement in forming 'into a regular and complete system one of the most important and intricate parts of political science', and ventured the opinion that 'if the English be capable of extending their ideas beyond the narrow and illiberal arrangements introduced by the mercantile supporters of the {Glorious} Revolution, and countenanced by Locke and some of their favourite writers', then *WN* will bring about a 'total change' in economic policy and finance.

**XX. (pp. 329–330)**

Within a few months of Smith's removal to Edinburgh in 1778, he took into his care David Douglas, the 9-year-old youngest son of another cousin, Col. Robert Douglas of Strathendry (Rae 1965, 326). Smith delighted in the company of this boy, occupied his leisure hours in helping to educate him (Stewart 1980/1793, V.18), and secured the mathematician and natural philosopher John Leslie to be his tutor, 1785–7 (*Corr.*, No. 275). David Douglas would be a blink of sunshine in that house of elderly people, and perhaps recreated for Smith what he seems to have enjoyed at Glasgow, contact with the expanding mind of youth.

It is from this period that we have some images of Smith and can visualize him in his Edinburgh surroundings (Pl. 10). In general terms, we are told by William Smellie the antiquarian printer and naturalist, who knew him well, that 'in stature he somewhat exceeded the ordinary size; and his countenance was manly and agreeable'. He was not an ostentatious man, and remarked once, 'I am a beau in nothing but my books' (Smellie 1800, 297).

**XXI. (p. 332)**

John Kay, whose engraver's shop was at the corner of Parliament Close, and who must have seen Adam Smith many times going towards the Royal Exchange opposite, on whose upper floors was the Custom-house, issued a print dated 1787 showing him in a broad-brimmed hat, wearing a light linen coat and carrying in his left hand a bunch of flowers, perhaps to ward off the notorious Edinburgh effluvia (Pl. 11: Kay 1842, i.72, 75; Evans and Evans 1973). In his right hand he grasps his cane by the middle, sloping it against his shoulder, according to Smellie, 'as a soldier carries his musket'. He also described Smith's strange gait, his head moving in a gentle manner from side to side, and his body swaying 'vermicularly' (a nice touch from a naturalist) as if with each step 'he meant to alter his direction, or even to turn back'. Meantime, his lips would move and form smiles as if he were deep in conversation with persons unseen (Smellie 1800, 293). Edinburgh anecdote had it that an old market-woman observing him in these oddities exclaimed:

'Heh, sirs!' and shook her head, to which a companion answered by sighing compassionately, then observed: 'and he is well put on too', thus expressing surprise that an obviously well-to-do lunatic would be allowed to wander freely. (Scott 1887/1827, 388)

**XXII. (pp. 332–333)**

At the entrance of the Exchange in Smith's time, to convey visitors on Custom-house business to what is now denominated the Old Council Room (Gifford et al. 1988 rpt.), was the doorkeeper, Adam Matheson. He appears in the official records, desiring on Christmas Eve 1778 more accommodation for his family in the garrets (SRO, Customs Board Minutes vol. 16), and getting a replacement for his scarlet gown bedecked with frogs of worsted lace. He was armed with a seven-foot wooden staff, and when the Board sat he saluted each arriving Commissioner with the kind of drill infantry officers used to perform with their spontoons or halberds, then conducted them up the great staircase to

the first floor boardroom to deliberate on Customs business. Walter Scott heard from one of the other Commissioners a tale of Smith being so mesmerized by the doorkeeper's salute that he returned it compulsively with his cane, to the servant's amazement (Scott 1887/1827, 388–389).

A suggestion has been made that this happened because Smith had been subjected to drill routine after becoming an Honorary Captain of the Trained Bands of Edinburgh—the City Guard—on 4 June 1781 (Graham 1908, 169; Rae 1965, 374). It is more likely, however, that Smith was deep in thought coming up the High Street and simply entranced by a military manoeuvre. The story is of a piece with another one Scott presents of Smith taking a long time to sign a Customs document, and being found to have imitated laboriously the signature of the colleague going before him.

### XXIII. (pp. 342–343)

A point to be made about this {that is, Smith's work as a Customs Commissioner}, however, is that Smith was one member of a Board guided by government and office policy and tradition, and he would have limited room for swaying his colleagues in the direction of putting into practice his own ideas about revenue collection and economic policy. The letters to {Henry} Dundas and {Lord} Carlisle about free trade for Ireland (*Corr.*, Nos. 201, 202), also to {William} Eden about raising revenue and American commerce (Nos. 203, 233), and to {John} Sinclair of Ulbster about the economic drain of empire and realistic duties (Nos. 221, 299) all indicate that Smith made no secret of his views to influential people asking for his comments and advice which, if taken, would affect practice in the Customs service.

He was invited to present his ideas about reducing smuggling to a House of Commons Committee dealing with this topic in 1783, and there is some evidence that {William} Pitt's Commutation Act of 1784 did embody Smith's principles in part at least in connection with duty on tea, also that by 1789 the contraband trade in that commodity had been dealt a severe blow (*Corr.*, app. D, p. 411). When Smith had a free hand to negotiate reformation of Customs duties, as we shall hear, he certainly did uphold his principles, but he also showed sensitivity about the effect of such a reformation would have on the livelihood of the Customs officers in Scotland. Moreover, as a Commissioner he did hear representations from concerned bodies that reflected the ideas expressed in *WTN*.

**XXIV. (p. 347)**

Regarding answers to the evil of smuggling, the Excise Board, with tact but nevertheless at the outset of their recommendations, suggests that lowering duties would reduce the temptation to smuggle. Smith was thus not alone in thinking along these lines, and later on firm support for free trade even came from members of official bodies enforcing monopolies, the tariff system, and the Navigation Acts.<sup>3</sup>

The Customs Board effected some of these suggestions to control smuggling in the south-west of Scotland, as appears from a letter co-signed by Adam Smith on 7 April 1785.

**XXV. (pp. 348, 349)**

{One} proposal Smith made for reforming the customs, that of warehousing imports under close inspection, with duty to be paid on goods when drawn out for home consumption, and to be duty-free if exported, was an extension of the excise practice in levying duties on rum (*WN*, V.ii.k.37). . . .

In connection with the warehousing proposal, Smith acted in concert with his colleagues, though we may think the wording of their report has something of the flavour of his style, and may in part have been composed by him. On at least one occasion, however, he had a free hand in making recommendations about Custom-house practice in Scotland, and apparently altering policy in the direction of his reforming and even free-trade principles.

**XXVI. (p. 350)**

{Smith} believed that what the Royal Burghs wanted was freedom of trade in the inland waters from variable fees for certificates relating to taxable goods. Agreeable to his principles, he finds no difficulty with this:

I have always been of opinion that not only the Trade within such Rivers and Firths but the whole Coasting Trade of Great Britain so far as it is carried on in Goods [not prohibited to be exported, or not liable to any duty. . . upon

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3. Mathias (1983, 91, 269), citing James Mill (East India Co.), James Deacon Hume (Customs Service and Board of Trade), and John McGregor (Board of Trade); account of abolition of the Navigation Acts in 1849 (p. 275); Rule (1992, 316).

exportation], may with great conveniency to the Merchants and with Security to the Revenue of the Customs be exempted from the formality of Bonds and Cockets.

He noted that a Bill to this end had been drafted for the Customs Board applicable to the Firth of Forth, and accordingly he argued that ‘it would be not only much shorter, but much more just and equal, to extend this exemption at once to the whole Coasting Trade of Great Britain’ (PRO, Kew, Treasury T1/570).

Predictably, the officers of the Customs service petitioned against the loss of income threatened by these proposals; but they did go into effect in large part. . . .

#### XXVII. (p. 351)

On 23 January 1781, the physician and merchant, also confidant of Lord Shelburne, Benjamin Vaughan, gave his Lordship an account of a visit to Edinburgh. He reported that he found Adam Smith ‘more to his relish than I know some hold he ought to be in the South...he is among the best of them [the Edinburgh literati], though with peculiarities of manners well enough known here’. He continued: ‘[Smith] is very well provided for in the customs, where he does not innovate; but I believe he at times wishes he had kept in his college, where he had both more time and more respect and perhaps more company’. . . .

Despite the disclaimer about Smith as an innovator in the Customs service, we have some evidence that in the course of his career as a Commissioner, his insights as an economic theorist, as well as his knowledge of practical affairs, led him to promote changes he viewed as both useful and just. It may be observed also that he was as scrupulous in his attention to his civil service duties, and role as a Commissioner, as he had been as a Glasgow professor.

#### XXVIII. (p. 358)

Yet the publication of Smith’s supplement to Hume’s *My Own Life*, in the form of a letter to {William} Strahan detailing Hume’s last illness, had aroused a storm of protest from Christians. They were infuriated because Smith had adapted as an epitaph for Hume the last sentence of the *Phaedo* (*Corr.*, No. 178; quoted Ch. 17). The most unchristian fury evoked in England by this linking of Hume to Socrates as truly virtuous and wise men in secular terms is well represented by *A Letter to Adam Smith, LL.D. on the Life, Death, and Philosophy of His Friend David Hume Esq. By One of the People Called Christians*, published anonymously by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1777 (4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1784), by no less a personage than the President

of Magdalen College, George Horne (Aston, *ODNB-O*, 2004), who ended his career as Bishop of Norwich. ... In so many words (p. 7), Horne accuses Smith of promoting atheism and denying there is a life to come of rewards and punishments, but he must have overlooked Smith's passage on the Atonement and Calvinist penal substitution theory retained in *TMS* until 1790 (Ch. 12 above). As for the shock felt in Scotland by 'every sober Christian' about Smith's Letter to Strahan, this was registered by the anecdotalist Ramsay of Ochtertyre (1888, i.466–467). Attacks such as Horne's led Smith to make his sardonic remark of October 1780: a 'single, and as, I thought, a very harmless Sheet of paper, which I happened to Write concerning the death of our late friend Mr Hume, brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain' (*Corr.*, No. 208).

**XXIX. (pp. 374–375)**

To be sure, Smith could be critical of {Edmund} Burke's efforts as a legislator. Thus, in the first edition of *WN* he had commented adversely on a Bill that Burke had devised to improve but essentially maintain bounties on the export of a grain, a subject still exercising him in preparing the third edition. Concerning certain features of what was enacted (13 Geo. III, c. 43, 1772), Smith wrote: 'The bounty ought certainly either to have been withdrawn at a much lower price, or exportation ought to have been allowed at a much higher. So far, therefore, this law seems to be inferior to the antient system' (IV.v.b. 52–53). Burke is said to have answered this criticism of not bringing about a repeal of the corn bounty with one of those metaphorical flights for which he was famous. He neatly distinguished between Smith's role as theorist with a tendency to model his systems on geometry, as Dugald Stewart perceived, and his own role as the practical man seeking to get a law through Parliament:

it was the privilege of philosophers to conceive their diagrams in geometrical accuracy; but the engineer must often impair the symmetry as well as the simplicity of his machine, in order to overcome the irregularities of friction and resistance. (quoted in Horner 1957, 98; Viner 1965, 23)

Smith allowed the justice of this answer, and had added to the second edition of *WN* (1778) a balanced comment on Burke's legislation:

With all its imperfections, however, we may perhaps say of it what was said of the laws of Solon, that, though not the best in itself, it is the best which the interests, prejudices, and temper of the times would admit of. It may perhaps in due time prepare the way for a better. (IV.v.b.53)

In the final revisions for the 1790 *TMS*, Smith included in the new section on Virtue a discussion of the ‘man of system’, making clear that the point Burke brought up about the Corn Bounty Act was germane to his own outlook:

Some general, and even systematical, idea of the perfection of policy and law, may no doubt be necessary for directing the views of the statesman [this being the drive of *WN*]. But to insist upon establishing, and upon establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which that idea may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance.

As in the 1778 *WN*, Smith evokes in the last edition of *TMS* the example of Solon as a legislator who, short of establishing the best system of laws, enacted the ‘best the people can bear’ (VI.ii.2.16, 18).

**XXX. (p. 377)**

But after the merriment and stimulation of Burke’s visit, and the excitement of the general election, came a sad event for Smith, the death of his mother on 23 May {1784}. He writes of this in a letter to Strahan dated 10 June, in which he comments on receiving the proofs of the new third edition of *WN* by the cheaper conveyance of the coach, when he would have preferred the proofs of the MS ‘additions’, at least, to have been sent by post:

I should immediately have acknowledged the receipt of the fair sheets; but I had just then come from performing the last duty to my poor old Mother; and tho’ the death of a person in the ninetieth year of her age was no doubt an event most agreeable to the course of nature; and, therefore, to be foreseen and prepared for; yet I must say to you, what I have said to other people, that the final separation from a person who certainly loved me more than any other person ever did or ever will love me; and whom I certainly loved and respected more than I ever shall either love or respect any other person, I cannot help feeling, even at this hour, as a very heavy stroke upon me. (*Corr.*, No. 237)

**XXXI. (p. 379)**

To be sure, {Jeremy} Bentham claims in the *Defence of Usury* that in refuting Smith’s arguments about the ‘policy of the laws fixing the rate of interest’, he is turning his master’s weapons against himself (*Corr.*, No. 388). He means that the tendency of *WN* is to show that economic growth has been created in spite of the laws made by governments, rather than as a result of them, and that this



demonstration can be extended to interest-rate controls against which the ‘prudent projectors’ who sustain growth have struggled with varying degrees of success (*Corr.*, No. 391).

It is difficult not to agree with Bentham’s reading of *WN* and even to see the message about the detrimental effect of most economic legislation intensified in the third edition.

**XXXII. (p. 399)**

It was in this letter {of 23 September 1788} that Smith wrote movingly of his grief at the impending death of his cousin Janet Douglas, who had looked after his mother and him for so many years (*Corr.*, app. E, p).

**XXXIII. (pp. 402–403)**

There was an Edinburgh tradition that on one occasion during this London visit Smith was one of the last gentlemen to come into the room in Dundas’s Wimbledon villa, where Pitt, {William Wyndham} Grenville, Henry Addington, and William Wilberforce were other guests. The company rose to receive Smith, and he asked them to be seated. Pitt is represented as saying: ‘No, we will stand till you are first seated, for we are all your scholars’ (Kay 1842, i.75; Rae 1965, 405). Smith had advance notice of Pitt’s good opinion of him, and had come round to valuing his ministry, despite his own adherence to the remnants of the Rockingham Whigs. Answering on 14 November 1786 a letter from the reform-minded MP Henry Beaufoy, he wrote:

I think myself much honoured by the slightest mark of Mr Pitts approbation. You may be assured that the long and strict friendship in which I have lived with some of his opponents, does not hinder me from discerning courage, activity, probity, and public spirit in the great outlines of his administration. (Piero Sraffa Collection B5/3, Trinity College, Cambridge)

Addington, later to be Grenville’s successor as Speaker of the House of Commons, 1789–1801, and thereafter a stopgap Prime Minister until Pitt regained control of affairs in 1804, is said to have returned home after the Wimbledon meeting and composed verses to the ‘author of the Wealth of Nations, etc.: on his visit to London and its neighbourhood in the month of June, 1787’:

I welcome you, whose wise and patriot page  
The road to wealth and peace hath well defin’d,

Hath strove to curb and soften hostile rage,  
 And to unite, with int'rest's tie, mankind:  
 Dragg'd from his lonely den, and at thy feet  
 The bloated fiend Monopoly is thrown:  
 And with thy fame, its splendor to compleat,  
 The pride and hope of Britain blends his own.  
 Proceed, great soul, and error's shades disperse,  
 Perfect and execute the glorious plan;  
 Extend your view wide as the Universe,  
 Burst every bar that sep'rates man from man,  
 And ne'er may war's curst banner be unfurled,  
 But commerce harmonize a jarring world!

This effusion was communicated to Smith early in 1790, and since the great man was a sound critic of poetry, Ernest Mossner once claimed it 'may well have hastened the end' (1969, 20–21).

**XXXIV. (pp. 428–429)**

The talk then turned to French writers, in particular Voltaire and Turgot. It was on this occasion that Smith would not hear of some 'clever but superficial author' being called by {Samuel} Rogers 'a Voltaire'. Smith banged the table and declared energetically, 'Sir, there is only one Voltaire.' Regarding Turgot, he was described to Rogers by Smith as an excellent, absolutely honest, and well-intended person, who was not well-versed in human nature with all its selfishness, stupidity, and prejudice.

**XXXV. (p. 430)**

{Samuel} Rogers was greatly impressed with Smith's kindness: 'he is a very friendly, agreeable man, and I should have dined and supped with him every day, if I had accepted all his invitations'. He seemed quite oblivious to the disparity in age between himself and the poet, who was then 23, and he was free with information and opinions. His manner Rogers described as 'quite familiar'; he would ask, for example: 'Who should we have to dinner?' Rogers did not see in him the absent-mindedness others stressed. Compared to Robertson, Smith seemed to Rogers far more a man of the world (*BL Add. MSS 32,566*; Dyce 1856, 45; Clayden 1887, 90, 96).

**XXXVI. (p.432)**

Smith anticipates that after the death {in 1788} of his cousin {Janet Douglas} he will suffer emotional destitution, and this is an indication that she had partly filled the gap in his life left by the death of his mother, to whom he was so strongly attached. As for other ladies in his life, Dugald Stewart tells us that as a young man Smith was in love with a beautiful and accomplished young woman, but unknown circumstances prevented their marriage, and both apparently afterwards decided not to marry (Stewart 1980/1793, n. K). Anecdote reports that Smith beamed at her in company later in life, and his cousin Janet Douglas is supposed to have said: 'Don't you know, Adam, this is your ain Jeannie?' But the smile was one of general kindness rather than special favour, and nothing came of the re-encounter (Mackay 1896, 209). In France he had sighed unavailingly for an Englishwoman named Mrs Nichol, and a French marquise pursued him without success, as far as we know, but he seems to have been entirely content with his existence as a bachelor.

**XXXVII. (p. 436)**

In any event, satisfied about the protection of his reputation or the safeguarding of moral and political truth, after the burning of his papers on that long-ago July Sunday in Panmure House, Smith felt well enough to welcome his friends in the evening with his usual equanimity. A considerable number of them came to be with him then, but he did not have strength to sit with them through supper, so he retired to bed before it. Henry Mackenzie recorded his parting words in the form: 'I love your company, gentlemen, but I believe I must leave you to go to another world' (quoted in Clayden 1887, 168). {James} Hutton gave Stewart some different wording: 'I believe we must adjourn this meeting to some other place' (quoted in Stewart 1980/1793, V.8 n., p. 328).

**XXXVIII. (p. 437)**

Since Smith lived in a hospitable but modest way, his friends wondered at the limited nature of the bequests, though no one has been detected censuring the will, as Beatson feared. We may believe that Smith left instructions to his heir that his servant was to be looked after properly, also that he had given away generous sums from his income in secret charity, hence his slender resources at the end. The instance has been mentioned of Smith giving £200 in 1783 to a 'Welch nephew' to save him from having to sell his army commission (*Corr.*, No. 231). Stewart

obtained first-hand information that strengthens belief that Smith was markedly generous in an unostentatious fashion:

Some very affecting instances of Mr Smith's beneficence, in cases where he found it impossible to conceal entirely his good offices, have been mentioned to me by a near relation of his, and one of his most confidential friends, Miss Ross, daughter of the late Patrick Ross, Esq., of Innerneathy. They were all on a scale much beyond what might have been expected from his fortune; and they were accompanied with circumstances equally honourable to the delicacy of his feelings and the liberality of his heart. (Stewart 1980/1793, V.4 n., p. 326)

**XXXIX. (p. 438)**

...Samuel Romilly, then a young barrister concerned with law reform, who had been added to the group of Whig liberals surrounding Lord Shelburne, and who was an admirer of Smith's advanced ideas, wrote {on 20 August 1790} to a French lady in response to her request for a copy of the latest edition of *TMS*:

I have been surprised and, I own, a little indignant to observe how little impression [Smith's] death {17 July 1790} has made here. Scarce any notice has been taken of it, while for above a year together after the death of Dr Johnson [1784] nothing was to be heard but panegyrics of him,—lives, letters, and anecdotes,—and even at this moment there are two more lives of him to start into existence [possibly Boswell's, 1791; and Arthur Murphy's, 1792]. Indeed, one ought not perhaps to be very much surprised that the public does not do justice to the works of A. Smith since he did not do justice to them himself, but always considered his *TMS* a much superior work to his [*WN*]. (Romilly 1840, i.403)

**XL. (pp. 444–445)**

Nature did not favour Smith in his mode of expression, it seems, for we read of his harsh voice with an almost stammering impediment, and a conversational style that amounted to lecturing (Carlyle 1973, 141). His friends understood this, and made allowances for his disposition. According to Stewart, they 'were often led to concert little schemes, in order to engage him in the discussions most likely to interest him'. They were greatly diverted when he expatiated in his social hours in his characteristically original way on subjects relatively unfamiliar to him, or advanced extreme positions or judgements on relatively slight grounds, and then

just as readily withdrew them when countervailing views were put to him. When with strangers, apparently, his manner was sometimes an embarrassed one, because he was conscious of, and perhaps on guard about, his customary absence of mind; also, he had very high speculative notions of propriety, yet an imperfect ability to live up to them. What shines through all accounts of his character and characteristics, particularly as they were displayed in his relationships with young people, was his essential kindness. Samuel Rose, grieving for the death of his father William, an old friend of Smith's from the time of his notice of *TMS* in the *Monthly Review* in 1759, wrote to a relative that 'Commissioner Smith has treated me with uncommon tenderness' (GUL MS Accession No. 4467 to Edward Foss, 19 July 1786). Somewhat in the same vein, Stewart wrote of Smith that 'in the society of those he loved, his features were often brightened with a smile of inexpressible benignity' (Stewart 1980/1793, V.17).

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**Ian Simpson Ross** (1930–2015) was Professor Emeritus of English at the University of British Columbia. A native of Scotland, he was educated at St. Andrews and Oxford prior to earning his Ph.D. at the University of Texas. Ross authored not only the biography of Adam Smith, excerpted here, but also biographies of the poet William Dunbar and Henry Home, Lord Kames. Ross's many works of scholarship related to Smith include his editorship of *The Correspondence of Adam Smith* (1977, with Ernest Mossner) and *On the Wealth of Nations: Contemporary Responses to Adam Smith* (1998).

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