

Scottish Men of Letters

CHAPTER VI

ADAM SMITH

IN the early part of the eighteenth century, Kirkcaldy, once a prosperous fishing town, had become a mean village. Only a few small vessels with Norway deals and Swedish iron came to its pier, and only a few boats set forth to the deep-sea fishing; for they were burdened by the Salt Tax, imposed since the Union, and Dutch herring busses caught their shoals in sight of their shore and bore their cargoes triumphantly to Holland. The shipping consisted of one coaster of fifty tons and two ferry-boats. There was a little traffic with coal, a little occupation in weaving “Dutch ticks” and “striped Holland” in that cluster of thatched houses with their 1500 inhabitants [*Stat. Acct. of Scotland, 1793 - “Kirkcaldy.”*] - among whom the most prosperous was some merchant who, in his little room, sold everything from tobacco plug to anchors. However, there was work for the Customs officers, who had to deal with smugglers who ran their brandy, wine, and lace on the coast. One of the few slated houses was the residence of Mr. Adam Smith, writer to the signet, Comptroller of Customs from Aberdour to Largo, at a salary of £80, supplemented by perquisites. He died a few months before his son, the author of the *Wealth of Nations*, was born in June 1723. The mother nearly lost her child for ever, for whilst she was staying with her father, the Laird of Strathendry, he was kidnapped by tinkers. At the grammar school of the decayed borough the boy had as classmates the sons of Mr. William Adam, King’s mason, who lived in the town, whose architectural skill was to be far surpassed by his four sons, grinding at their Ruddiman’s *Rudiments* and Eutropius in the thatched school.

After four years’ training there, Adam Smith was sent to Glasgow College, to which many lads were attracted by teachers who were stirring the old dry bones of scholastic philosophy into intellectual life. Robert Simson was in his chair of mathematics, sustaining a brilliant reputation. Francis Hutcheson was lecturing on moral philosophy to devoted students. Adam Smith imbibed much of his taste for philosophy from that teacher, and he was only a lad of seventeen when Hutcheson recommended David Hume to send him a copy of his *Treatise on Human Nature*.

[Burton’s *Hume*, i. 116.]



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From the Portrait by Kay.

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His gaining the Snell Exhibition - a prize of £40 a year - carried him in 1740 to fresh fields of study. Mr. John Snell in the previous century had left money for the purpose of training students for the Church of Scotland when it was Episcopal; but since the disestablishment of prelacy the funds were devoted to teaching Scots youths of any denomination at Balliol College. It was not a pleasant ordeal for the home-bred lads from north of the border to enter into that foreign society. Their poverty, their unpolished manners, their tongue, and their kirk were objects of ridicule to English undergraduates, who had no hesitation in lacerating their Caledonian feelings with all the brutal frankness characteristic of youth. Eight Scots lads found themselves living in painful isolation amongst eighty English students; and bitterly they complained of the ignominious treatment they suffered, and sometimes plaintively they begged to be transferred to some less arrogant college. Of the Snell scholars' bursary of £40, wages and board absorbed £30, fees took another £5, and little was left for decent clothing and for comforts. [Rae's *Life of Adam Smith*, p. 19.] After all, what was the benefit of being educated in those days at English Universities? Learning was stagnant in them, their dulness was a byword, ignorance and idleness were characteristics of those "rotten boroughs of the arts." Scraps of antiquated philosophy, tags of forgotten scholarship were given by professors and tutors who taught as little as students cared to learn. [Gibbon's *Memoirs* (edit. Hill), p. 60; *Wealth of Nations*, iii. 168; *Life of Sir G. Elliot*, i. 39; Lady Minto's *Memoir of Hugh, Elliot*, p. 12.] They knew Bishop Berkeley more by his praises of the medicinal virtues of tar water in his memorable treatise than by the subtle philosophy he distilled from it. During a great part of the century, though great men were trained there, they regarded the time spent as the most wasted of their lives. Thither Adam Smith rode in June 1740. In the lack of good teachers he taught himself. He browsed in the deserted libraries, devoted himself to Greek and Latin, read with avidity French and Italian literature. Six years he remained at Oxford, and returned to Kirkaldy well read in classics, well informed in English letters, and able to speak with fairly English tones.

In those days, for a man of literary habits, there were few means of employment in Scotland. There was the Church, but for that Smith had no "call"; there was the Law, but for that he had no gifts. We find him staying with his mother in the house in the Main Street, with its garden, that ran down towards the shore, studying hard in his room, and sauntering meditatively along the beach; and often taking the ferry to Edinburgh, to see David Hume, the most congenial and suggestive of his companions, and Carlyle, Ferguson, and Robertson, at their houses and in taverns. Occupation came at last. Men of leisure and culture were

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then awakening to a sense of their provincialism; they were desirous of knowing more of literature, ambitious to read English and to speak it; and there were many men of high accomplishments and scholarship among the Scottish gentry. A happy plan was carried out that Smith should give lectures on literature in a class-room at the College, and on these benches sat about a hundred of the best-fashioned and best-brained men in the city - young lawyers and divines, clever merchants, and lairds and noblemen who were spending the winter in town. In this way he earned £100 and a widening reputation with it. One does not usually think of the great economist in the light of a lover of "polite letters," yet none was more alert than he in literary interests, and in later years friends were surprised at his wide acquaintance with poetry, which he could copiously quote. But a poet he himself could never be. As Samuel Rogers said that though he never went to church, he had religious aspirations; so, though this lecturer on Belles Lettres had poetical aspirations, he never worshipped the muses. Blank verse he despised, even in a drama - an opinion for which Dr. Johnson, who vastly disliked him, alleged he could have hugged him - yet he confessed he "never could find a rhyme in his life," while "he could make blank verse as fast as he could speak." [*The Bee*, 1791, pp. 3, 5.] The literary critics of that age - are they different now? - were provokingly fallible, and were wont to indulge in criticisms which the calm vision of posterity regards with amazement. So Racine's *Phèdre* was, according to this critic, the greatest tragedy ever written, while Shakespeare had written only "some good scenes, but never a good play." When Wordsworth said "he was the worst critic - David Hume not excepted - that Scotland, a soil to which this sort of weed seems natural, has produced," [Wordsworth's *Works*, 1858, vol. vi. 356.] he did not yet know all the feats of which Scotland was capable under the reigns of Francis Jeffrey and Christopher North.

In time there came to Adam Smith an occupation which suited him. In 1751 he got the chair of Logic in Glasgow University, which in a year he quitted for the more congenial professorship of Moral Philosophy, in that class-room where he had as a boy sat listening to Francis Hutcheson. Fain would David Hume have succeeded him in the chair of Logic; fain, too, would he have had his friend as a comrade. But, alas! an infidel as an instructor of youth was an unheard-of thing, an atrocity impossible in the pious city of Glasgow, which had of late prospered exceedingly - of course "under providence" - through rum, tobacco, and sugar, and had as its esteemed motto, "let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the Word."

To a house in the grim, sombre Professors' Court, Smith brought his mother and his spinster cousin, and there he entered the quaint-fashioned society where

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professors and their families lived in harmony and severe frugality. Their incomes were meagre - about £70 as salary, and probably another £70 for fees. They could not compete with the rich merchants of the Saltmarket, or the Tobacco Lords who paced the plainstones of the Trongate in pomp and scarlet cloaks. Several of them had got their posts by bribing with slump sums their predecessors to retire, thereby getting into debt, which hung round their neck for years; or they had got the old teachers to retire on their salaries, while they taught and lived only on the fees. [Professor Simson agrees to demit his chair to Mr. James Williamson on condition of retaining the whole of the salary and a sum of money agreeable to arbitration (*Caldwell Papers*, i. 174).] Every shilling was therefore of consequence to them. No wonder Professor Black sat at his desk when the students were paying their fees with a brass pair of scales beside him, on which he, with exact nicety, weighed the coins, to sift the light guineas from the good. [Brougham's *Men of Letters and Science*, p. 352. In 1766 Dr. Reid writes: "The salary of Dr. Black's place is £50 as Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine. . . . Dr. Black, and Dr. Cullen before him, had £20 yearly from the College for teaching chemistry. . . . The chemical class this session might bring £50 or £60 of fees; so that the whole salary and fees will be between £140 and £160." - *Works* (edit. by Hamilton), p. 43.] To increase their income the masters kept boarders, or rather the boarders kept them. They had as inmates sons of lairds or noblemen, whom they treated with respect, to whom they gave of their best, and before whom they displayed their best company manners.

Since the days that Adam Smith had been a student in the College many things had changed. The old austerity had begun to relax. On Sundays the youths no longer assembled to prayer in the early morning, and marched meekly to kirk twice a day; yet they were still expected to go with their professors to Blackfriars Kirk, to sit in the loft, and there to sing melodiously the songs of Zion. It would sometimes happen that at these diets of worship over Mr. Smith's face there would steal a soft smile [Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 468.] and his lips would move strangely during prayers, thereby confirming the devout in their worst suspicions regarding the religious laxity of the friend of David Hume. Yet it was no act of irreverence; it was only the man's thoughts, lulled by a twenty minutes' prayer or a fifty minutes' soporific discourse, wandering away to realms where Calvin was unknown and where evangelical preachers were inaudible. No longer did he assemble his students on Sabbath evenings and give a suitable discourse, as Professor Hutcheson had done: he even desired to discontinue the opening prayer in his class-room. This godless omission, however, the Faculty would not permit, so he continued to offer prayers, savouring, it was sadly noted, of "natural religion."

In his class-room the range of subjects was enormous - ethics, natural theology, and jurisprudence, commerce and political institutions. Nor was this all.

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The energetic professor discoursed on the history of philosophy and on rhetoric. A curious miscellaneous company of students filled his class-room - raw Lowland and Highland students from farm and croft, from manse and mansion; Irish students with the richest of brogues and the poorest of clothing; boarders in laced coats and powdered hair; youths in their teens and ministers in their sixties. Speaking almost extempore, and sensitive as to the impression he made, Smith never was satisfied till the dullest face was moved to interest. He used to tell how, during a whole session, one student served him as a measure of success. [Sinclair's *Old Times and Distant Places*, p. 9.] "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 all was wrong and that I must either change the subject or the style of my address." It was not often he had to complain of inattention.

So early as 1753 Smith laid down in his class those principles of free trade and economy which he was to enforce and illustrate in his *Wealth of Nations*; [*Lectures in Glasgow* by Adam Smith (edit. by Cannan).] and his priority to the French economists, Quesnai and Turgot, he jealously asserted, his usually equable temper being roused when his claims were disputed. In Glasgow his doctrines fell on grateful soil. It was a period in Scotland when attention was being directed to economic questions - to the encouragement of trade, agriculture, and the industrial development of the country. Men of intelligence and rank were inciting practical men to energy. In 1752 David Hume had published his essay on the Balance of Trade; in 1754 the Select Society, which soon numbered 300 members, began to promote the improvement of land, linen manufacture, shipping, and art. In Glasgow there was a Political Economy Club, presided over by the public-spirited provost, to further the trade of the town with its 20,000 people, whose prosperity and commerce were increasing year by year. Young men even were eagerly discussing the duties on iron, the relative merits of £1 and £5 notes, at meetings in taverns which finished up the evening with inevitable suppers and rum punch. Among such a community, Adam Smith's opinions could not lie barren. But if Glasgow learned much from him, he learned, no less from it: a mercantile city was the best study for an economist to live in.

In other directions appeared signs of intellectual and scientific progress in Glasgow. Behind the college lay the pleasant gardens, where professors and their families strolled in the evening, on the gravelled walks and grass under shady trees. Within these the University built a humble structure, to which the type-founder, Alexander Wilson, formerly an apothecary's apprentice in St. Andrews, removed

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his machinery. Munificently the college expended £60 for its erection, and usuriously charged six and a half per cent for its use. Science also began to excite interest, and Wilson, the type-founder, in 1761, became the first Professor of Astronomy, and made a name by his discovery that the solar spots were depressions in the luminous matter surrounding the sun. In a part of the college quadrangle, James Watt, whom the exclusive corporation of Hammermen prevented plying his trade in the city, was allowed to set up his workshop and sale-room, there mending, making, and selling spectacles, flutes, and guitars (though without the slightest ear), as well as quadrants and mathematical instruments. His shop was the resort of professors, pleased with his talk and interested in his models. Young Robison, the student, would linger there, discussing physics and science with the mechanic, and forming a friendship that was to be as close when James Watt was the great engineer and Professor John Robison was one of the first of Scottish natural philosophers. Dr. Black, whose discoveries on latent heat and fixed air were to be potent in the evolution of steam engineering, often came to discuss problems with his young friend, whistling gently as he explored the strange contents of the room, while Watt was busy making a barrel-organ for him - in which he was helped by a book on "Harmonics." [Smiles's *Lives of Boulton and Watt*, 1878, p. 32.] In another part of the quadrangle, Robert and Andrew Foulis had been given rooms by the hospitable college for their bookshop and for their printing-press, from which had come, on Wilson's fine types, their magnificent Homer and the supposed immaculate text of their Horace. In yet another big chamber assigned to them the worthy brothers had their Academy of Design for the furtherance of art, being guilelessly proud of their poor "bustoes" and bad "masterpieces," which students were copying. Never were two mortals more congenial than these Foulises - equally enthusiastic over books, of which they knew much, and about pictures, of which they knew nothing. In winter evenings they held their auction sale of books, when Robert, on the rostrum, would with delicious simplicity carefully point out every flaw in the volumes. "How was this book presented for sale?" one night he asked severely, as he took up *Tom Jones*. "It is most improper for young persons," and he flung it indignantly aside. A poor threadbare student one day was bidding tremulously for an Antoninus, and the good man, asking him if he was really anxious for it, gave it to him for nothing. Practical and paunchy Andrew soon dislodged his brother from the post, for which his honesty and humanity totally unfitted him: "Robin, come down, that place is not for you." [Duncan's *Lit. Hist. of Glasgow*, p. 43.]

When Smith was in Glasgow there were congenial companions in these

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College homes. Besides others who are less known to fame were Dr. Cullen, till he left for Edinburgh; Dr. Joseph Black, who succeeded him in the chair of Chemistry; Moor, the fine scholar, professor of Greek, who corrected the press for his brothers-in-law, the Foulises. Then there was Dr. Robert Simson, the renowned professor of Mathematics, who was learned in theology - having studied for the Church - in classics, in philosophy, and in botany, who had got from St. Andrews the degree of M.D., though he knew nothing of drugs except those he tried to swallow. Few were admitted into his learned and dusty abode in the court, which was under the care of a housekeeper who managed the house and its master. For forty years the great geometer's habits continued unchanged like his costume. His tall, benignant person was clad in white cloth coat, waistcoat, and breeches; he took his daily walk in the grounds, and made his stated visits to the ale-house, at the college gate in the High Street, where he ate his frugal meal, and where on the Friday evenings he entertained his friends with supper and whist. There were the visits every Saturday to the Club, which met at a little tavern in the village of Anderston, then remote from the city, but now part of its most peopled and squalid quarters. Thither a little band of professors made their way every week - Dr. Simson whimsically counting each step he took, and from his lips would come softly the successive numbers "1760-1761-1762," and so on, as he continued his reckoning and his walk. At the board, over which the old professor presided, the members were happy over their national fare - their hen soup, sheep's head, collops, and haggis - and when the cloth was removed, the table was prepared for whist and rum punch. Simson, who loved "the rigour of the game" as dearly as Mrs. Battle, was hard pressed to keep his equable temper when Adam Smith, all absent-minded, shamefully revoked or trumped his partner's best card. When the game ended, good talk followed on books, politics, and philosophy, and there were story and song - the chairman, with voice still mellow, singing Greek odes set to modern music, or chanting a Latin hymn "to the Divine Geometer," with emotion that dimmed his venerable eyes. [Ency. Brit. 1797, *sub voce* (article by Robison).] Dr. Joseph Black, who was brilliantly teaching Chemistry in the College, and practising as beloved physician in the city, at that frugal friendly board gave his clear vivid talk, and his sweet benignity of presence, which was a convivial benediction. Professor James Moor added mirth by his jests and his puns, and brought into the learned company an air of fashion, with his smart dress and carefully powdered wig, which one day caused an officer to remark to another, as he passed them in the street, "He smells strongly of powder." "Don't be alarmed, gentlemen," said the dapper professor, turning round; "it is not

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gunpowder.” [Strang’s *Clubs of Glasgow*, 2nd edit. p. 313.] James Watt often joined the party, for though but a young mechanic, he was as alert at talking on science and letters as any of his seniors. To that fraternity Adam Smith added more solidity than humour. At a seemly hour the learned band would wend their way homewards, in the dusk or the dark, in perfect sobriety, although Dr. Simson may not have been quite so careful and exact in counting his steps on the return journey.

In 1759 Smith published his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, from the shop of the inevitable Andrew Millar of London. Here was another of the many theories started to find an explanation of the origin of moral feelings and judgments. A pleasant optimism caught from the teaching of his master Hutcheson pervades the treatise. “This is a world where everything is for the best, under a great benevolent Being, who seeks to give the greatest possible amount of happiness here and hereafter.” It is through sympathy we form moral judgments of our actions. We put ourselves in another’s place, and estimate how the impartial witness would sympathise or not with our conduct. We in this way became spectators of ourselves. “This is the only looking-glass by which we can in some measure, with the eyes of others, scrutinise the propriety of our own conduct.” [*Theory of Moral Sentiments*, i. 230.] This theory is worked out in its complexity with ingenuity, with great felicity of illustration, and keen analytic skill. It was a success as a piece of literature, though a failure as a piece of philosophy.

David Hume now as ever was the first to tell news of his friend’s success, though it upheld a view which was utterly opposed to his own utilitarian theory, according to which, said Smith, we approve a moral action for the same reason that we praise “a chest of drawers.” He wrote from London: “The mob of literati are beginning to be loud with praise” [Burton’s *Life of Hume*, ii. 57.]; “three bishops called at Millar’s shop in order to buy copies and ask questions about its author”; “the Duke of Argyll was strongly in its favour”; and much more to the same gratifying effect. Moreover, so charmed was the Hon. Charles Townshend - step-father to the Duke of Buccleugh - that he resolved to put his distinguished relative under the governorship of a man who knew human nature so well, and enforced virtue so finely. Three years later, when the Duke was old enough to travel, it was a matter of surprise that “Weather-cock” Townshend, the most changeable of mortals, was still of the same mind, and offered Adam Smith terms which were handsome to a poor professor - a salary of £400, and a pension for life of £300. He even asked the professor to name his own terms, and these were exceeded by the offer of Townshend. In January 1764 the professor relinquished his post, for he was too

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conscientious to hold his chair, retain his salary, and desert his duties, as other professors who became tutors were in the habit of doing - getting a cheap substitute to teach for three or four years till their return. We see him at the close of his last lecture bidding farewell to his class, and drawing from his pocket the fees, each neatly wrapped in paper. Beginning to call the students one by one, he handed one of the little parcels to the first youth he summoned. It was at once stoutly refused, the lad protesting that the instruction he had already received from his master were more than he could repay; an answer which evoked a responsive cheer from his fellows. Thereupon the professor seized him by the coat, exclaiming, "You must not refuse me this satisfaction. Nay, by heaven, gentlemen, you shall not!" And forcing the money in his pocket, he shoved him off. The others saw his bidding must be done, and reluctantly gave way. Thus by a pretty scene ended a brilliant university career, which won affection for the man, and reputation for his work.

In those days it was considered essential for a youth of rank and fortune to travel abroad, under charge of a governor, and over the Continent were passing many young noblemen and gentlemen, guided by Scottish professors and physicians. It seemed better to send them to the Continent to study men and manners, to see towns and countries, than to send them to Oxford and Cambridge - drowsy halls haunted by the ghosts of dead languages and defunct philosophies, where was absorbed more port than knowledge. The experiment, it is true, was not always successful in polishing a gentleman and cultivating an embryo statesman. [*Wealth of Nations*, bk. v. chap. i.] They often came back from the Grand Tour, having only vivid memories of its theatres, its gambling hells, and its frail beauties; with as few intellectual results as Sir Timothy Shelley, the poet's father, who returned with a smattering of erroneous French and two bad pictures of an eruption of Mount Vesuvius. A youth went forth a hobbledohoy of nineteen, and came back a coxcomb of twenty-three, having "spoiled his own language and acquired no more." These sons of leisure sauntered Europe round, travelled from city to city, extracted its pleasures, yawned over its art, and passed over the Alps and the Apennines on osier baskets borne perilously and ignobly on porters' backs, and to their dying day would declaim against "the horrors" of the terrific mountains, having in trepidation for their life observed none of their glories. Tutors had not always a comfortable berth with their noble charges, whom they needed to hold in like a leash of dogs - and often "sad dogs" they were - all the time afraid to offend or thwart their future patrons for a living or an office. They had to sit on the back seat of a calèche, to follow their pupil into a room, to address him deferentially as "My Lord," and to be

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casually introduced - with an explanation - to his friends. Fortunately Adam Smith had a pupil worth leading, and the young Duke had a governor worth following. Who could have supposed that this least practical of men, this most absent-minded of thinkers, this most guileless wayfarer in the world, would be fit to conduct a youth? Yet the probity, the honourableness, the brilliant intelligence of this tutor counted for much, and Townshend was vain of securing so eminent a man for the post.

Three years passed by. Pupil and governor, with their servants, visited all the chief towns of France - Toulouse, with its leisurely colony of English, who could not speak French; Montpellier, with its crowds of fashion and sicklings and *malades imaginaires*, who sauntered in the shady avenues and resorted to physicians, who prescribed to please their patients' fancy and sent in bills to please their own. Smith visited Ferney, the literary Mecca, near Geneva, to see Voltaire; and that patriarch of a pagan dispensation, aged, wrinkled, and weazened, with eyes glittering like carbuncles, showed a wit, malice, and penetration that dazzled the slow-speaking Scot. Then Paris was visited, where every salon, and the Court itself, was open to receive both a Duke and a philosopher. In fashionable circles which doted on "sensibility," after *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Clarissa Harlowe* had touched the organs which their owners mistook for hearts, a writer like the author of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (already known by a bad translation) was sure of a welcome, especially from emotional dames, who fancied that when he had derived moral sentiments from sympathy, he had reduced morality to sentiment, so that one could be moral without the trouble of being virtuous. The philosophic tutor spoke little French, and that little very poorly, like his friend Hume; but that did not prevent a marquise falling rapturously in love with him, or impulsive Madame Riccoboni (who had given up acting romance badly on the stage for writing it still worse for the press) from raving over "this most lovable and most distraught of creatures." [Rae's *Life of A. Smith*, p. 212.] More congenial society than these poor social butterflies he found in Quesnai, physician to Madame de Pompadour, who, with his friends, was full of theories on trade and commerce, and debated in his rooms at Versailles "immediate taxes" and *net produit*, with extravagant gesture and vocal animation. Quesnai was as ready to doctor the State as the King, and had as many remedies for the body politic as for the body royal. [Marmontel's *Memoirs* (Eng. trans.), 1895, i. 213.] Amid these discussions in the *entresol* Adam Smith learned much - so much, indeed, that those who knew not what he had been teaching in Glasgow for years, believed that he derived all his doctrines from Quesnai and Turgot.

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He witnessed the miseries of the people, on whom the State was, as Turgot said, trying the experiment of plucking the fowl without making it cry. He saw the shameless extravagance of the Court; the light hearts of the noblesse, and the heavy hearts of the peasantry; yet, deceived by the optimism of Quesnai, Turgot, and Necker, with their sanguine projects, he did not foresee the inevitable downfall of the corrupt old régime. The surface of society was deceptively calm as he gazed at it from hotel windows. "Everything is quiet," said a complacent official in a silent, sulky district of India, to Sir John Malcolm on one occasion. "Yes," he answered, with more discernment, "quiet as gunpowder."

Society in France had some charm for Adam Smith who, in spite of his bad French, enjoyed the brilliant talk of Helvétius, D'Alembert, and Morellet; the gatherings at Madame du Deffand's - that Voltaire in petticoats - and at Madame Geoffrin's, whom young Lord Carlisle irreverently called "an impertinent old brimstone." But it palled on him, as it did on Hume. "I am happy here; yet I long to rejoin my old friends. If I once got fairly to your side of the water, I think I should never cross it again" - so he wrote to good Andrew Millar, the bookseller. A melancholy accident hastened the fulfilment of his wish. Lord Hugh Scott, the Duke's brother, who was now also under his charge, was murdered in the streets of Paris, and with his body the party returned to England.

It is certain that the experience and observation of these three years of travel were an immense advantage to Adam Smith. The pages of his great work are filled with references to the laws and customs of France. If the sure way of learning to cure disease is to study it, he had abundant scope in that distressful country, which afforded a fine study in social pathology. Many a lesson in political economy he gained from the study of political prodigality in France.

The scene now changes, for his tutorship is over and his pension has begun, and he can live in study and leisure. He is once more back in the old house with his mother in the Main Street of Kirkcaldy, which was to be his home for eleven busy years. It was a startling change from the brilliant and polished society of France to the plodding, provincial folk of the little borough, with their talk about the price of fish and coals; their news about the freight of the last smack arrived at the little harbour; and the petty gossip at the weekly meetings of the club of local quidnuncs which Smith attended. As he looked out of the windows he saw Edinburgh at the other side of the firth, and he often was induced to cross the ferry to have rational conversation with his friends, for he knew that David Hume had a special chamber ready for him in James' Court. Years passed by, and he was absorbed in writing his

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Wealth of Nations. In his little study he would dictate to his amanuensis, his body swaying to and fro, and smearing the wall over the mantelpiece with the pomatum on his powdered head. [Chambers's *Picture of Scotland*.] Engrossed in his work, he would become strangely oblivious. One Sunday morning, all engrossed in his thoughts, he began to walk in the garden in his dressing-gown, and vacantly wandered through the gate to the high-road, till he nearly reached Dumfermline, sixteen miles away, where he was roused from his reverie by the sound of the tolling bells and the sight of folk staring at the strange apparition as they went decently Sabbath-clad to kirk. [Rogers's *Social Life of Scotland*, iii. 118.]

The years from 1772 to 1775 seem to have been spent chiefly in London, where he was busy completing his work. During former years he had visited the capital, and it was probably in 1761 that he had his famous interview with Dr. Johnson, when, as the lexicographer put it mildly, "they did not take to each other," or, to put it correctly, they fiercely quarrelled. At Mr. William Strahan's a keen altercation arose; and the economist bounced from the presence of "the brute," as he called him, who had compactly said to him, "That is a lie." The retort, more pungent than proper, traditionally ascribed to the outraged economist may be regarded as apocryphal. [When Adam Smith was asked what he replied to Johnson, he said he called him "the son of a b --h." This story, however, as told by Sir Walter Scott on the authority of Professor Millar of Glasgow, is so inconsistent in the details that we cannot accept it. Sir Walter had a taste for colouring with graphic touches most anecdotes that passed through his hands (Boswell's *Johnson*, iii. 331, v. 367; Rae's *Life of Smith*, pp. 38, 154).] The oracle could be rude with little provocation (except, of course, to a bishop or a lord), and he ventured to be so with Adam Smith more than once - probably trusting to the mild temper of the philosopher. When the Scotsman was one day expatiating to him on the beauty of Glasgow - "Have you ever seen Brentford?" was the rejoinder of the sage of Bolt Court - a retort meant as sheer impertinence, for that place was noted for dulness and dirt - the "town of mud" in the *Castle of Indolence*. No love was lost between the two men. "I have seen the creature" - thus irreverently did Mr. Smith speak of the great man - "stand bolt upright in the midst of a mixed company, and without previous notice fall upon his knees, behind a chair, and repeat the Lord's Prayer, and then resume his seat at table - and this several times of an evening." [*The Bee*, 1791, iii. 2.] Time must, however, have soothed Johnson's animosity or brought him to penitence, for in 1775 Adam Smith was admitted a member of the Literary Club, in which the moralist's voice was all-powerful. Boswell was disgusted at the choice of his old professor to sit at the august board. Gibbon's entrance was bad enough - "a disgusting creature," said Bozzy - and here was another to spoil his pleasure. "Smith, too, is a member," he wrote in chagrin to

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his friend Temple; “it has lost its select merit.” [*Letters to Temple*, p. 233.] This is very fine. Evidently Mr. Smith was not the most vivacious of table-talkers. Instructive, well-informed he certainly was, but London diners-out did not care for too substantial colloquial fare. It was after listening to the economist’s rather heavy harangues, delivered in decisive professorial manner, that Garrick one day whispered to his friend - “What do you say to this, eh? - flabby; eh?” His voice was harsh, his utterance thick and almost stammering, which did not help to captivate the wits and men of the world. [Carlyle’s *Autobiography*, p. 279; Stewart’s *Works*, p. 117.] It is useless for a man in society to have a “wealth of conversation” if he has no small change.

It was in 1776 that the work to which so many years had been devoted saw the light. For years his friends had been looking for it. Great things were expected of it, and when the *Enquiry into the Wealth of Nations* appeared, interest in Edinburgh literary circles was keen. It does not say much for the critical acumen of his friend “Jupiter” Carlyle, that he can only say of this epoch-making book that “it is full of repetitions, and that the second volume consists of essays like occasional pamphlets, without force or determination.” [Carlyle’s *Autobiography*, p. 281.] Almost unnoticed by reviews, though it soon passed into a second edition, its effect was in a few years marked in legislation; and, curious to say, it was the Tories under Pitt that first recognised its great principles, and the Whigs under Fox that flouted them. [Fox owned he never read the book and could not understand the subject.] Political economy was at once raised by Adam Smith from vagrant theories into a science. The views he enforced were not all new - free-trade had had its advocates before him. His theories were not all true - future economists had to correct them after him. But his keen insight into the social laws which regulate commerce and trade, his power of illustrating large principles by the simplest facts of life, his vast stores of observation, which he would use to confirm a statement or to burst a fallacy - these were remarkable in a man who in private life seemed the most absent-minded of mortals. Friends laughed at his obliviousness to what was going on around him, yet he would see in small affairs great economic laws at work which were beyond their vision. Nothing escaped him: the making of pins illustrated the doctrine on the division of labour; the practice of nailers at Pathhead exchanging nails for goods, illustrated the principles of barter. The ingenuity of his conclusions, it has been said, comes often with the pleasant unexpectedness of a witticism. [Leslie Stephen’s *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, ii. 318.] The whole subject becomes in his hands no “dismal science,” and the illustrative facts which he gives from his observation at home and abroad even make it, Bagehot characteristically said, “a most amusing book about old

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times.” [Bagehot’s *Biographical Studies*, p. 273.] It is not in that light, however, the world is inclined to regard it. Much has been said about the inconsistency of the author of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, who had derived moral feeling from sympathy, in his *Wealth of Nations* treating selfishness as the all-prevailing motive in conduct. But what else could he do? He took the strongest impulse which undoubtedly works in trade, in commerce, and business - namely, “the natural effort of the individual to better his condition” (which conduces, he holds, to the well-being of the race). Whenever human nature ceases to act in the struggle for prosperity, individual or national, mainly on that self-regarding principle, it will be time to complain of Adam Smith treating it as the main factor in political economy.

Among those who hailed his success with loving praise, no voice was so grateful to him, none so earnest, none so valuable, as that of David Hume, to whose own economical theories he was not a little indebted. The friendship of long years, the intimacy of congenial natures, bound these two men together with an attachment stronger than united any others of that distinguished band. One day in 1775, as Adam Smith and John Home were on their way to Scotland, their chaise stopped at Morpeth Inn, and there they found David Hume travelling alone, weary and ill, to London, to consult Sir John Pringle about his health. In his boundless good-nature John Home at once turned back, accompanied his old friend first to London and thence to Bath, while Smith was obliged to go on his way to Kirkcaldy, where his mother was ill. [Mackenzie’s *Life of Home*, p. 169.] When next they met, it was at that dinner in July to which the dying philosopher had summoned his old comrades on his return from Bath, and often he visited him in his sick-room. Hume was anxious that he should publish for him after death his *Dialogues on Religion* and *Essay on Suicide*, but with his usual caution and timidity he declined the commission. He was afraid of the “clamour,” he was afraid of the odium: a tremor which turned out to be quite unnecessary, for when they did appear they caused no commotion whatever. But “clamour” against him did arise where he least expected it. When Hume’s brief autobiography was published, he appended a letter to Strahan, the printer, giving an account of the historian’s last days, and an estimate of his character, which concluded with the words: “Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit.” Here were words which created a furore among the pious and the orthodox. An atheist yet “perfectly virtuous,” an infidel yet a “good man,” a denier of revelation yet “perfectly wise.” There indeed was blasphemy ! It was useless to

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protest that Hume was no atheist; for excited orthodoxy does not stickle about the accuracy of an epithet or a fact. The vigorous *Letter to Adam Smith, LL.D., by one of the People called Christians*, from Bishop Horne's pen, ran through several editions, showing that a man could not be wise and good who was "guilty of the atrocious wickedness of diffusing atheism throughout the land," and denouncing poor Adam Smith as upholding the criminal opinions of the pagan saint.

After all, Adam Smith suffered no damage in his prospects, for two years later he was appointed Commissioner of Customs, with a salary of £600; and as the Duke of Buccleugh would not accept his offer to resign the pension of £300, he had a comfortable fortune for a homely bachelor. Mr. Commissioner Smith conveyed his goods and chattels, his ample library, his old mother, and spinster cousin, Miss Jean Douglas, to Edinburgh, where he chose as his residence Panmure House at the end of a narrow wynd off the Canongate, which seemed a palatial residence in those days. [Yet not too spacious, for in 1790, when a friend is going to stay with him, he writes to his nephew: "By putting a bed in our drawing-room we can easily accommodate him" (unpublished letter)] There he had all that could make him happy: his mother whom he adored; old friends around him; his library of 3000 volumes, with binding in which he took pride, saying to Smellie, the learned printer, who was looking over them, "I am a beau in nothing but my books." He was employed at his office in the Royal Exchange over plans for a lighthouse, reports on smuggling, the suppression of illicit stills, the appointment of excisemen. This was no very appropriate occupation for a man of his intellectual power; yet the insight he gained into details about taxes and revenue was of no small service to him in successive editions of his great work.

Edinburgh was full of interest for his idle hours. It was impossible to go out of his office without seeing some acquaintance to speak to, or some bore to avoid. He engaged with Principal Robertson and Dr. Ferguson in forming the Royal Society of Edinburgh, at whose scientific meetings he was to be seen in placid slumber [Clayden's *Early Life of Rogers*, p. 96.]; and he acted as captain of the trained bands of the town, decked out in their quaint garb. There was the Oyster Club, which in a tavern at two o'clock sat down to a simple repast. Adam Smith, Drs. Robertson and Blair, Dr. Cullen, Dugald Stewart, Henry Mackenzie were there; and the abstemious cronies, Dr. James Hutton and Dr. Joseph Black, whose diet consisted of a few prunes and milk and water. Black and Hutton were the men Smith loved best - two companions strangely unlike, yet closely attached to each other. Dr. Black, in his modish costume, with his nicely-balanced judgments and apt phrases, uttered in always purest English, was a curious contrast to Dr. Hutton, in drab, Quaker-like

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dress and broad-brimmed hat, loquaciously eager on every possible and impossible scheme, which he discussed in the broadest of Scots. It was said that “every eye brightened when Hutton came into the room” - a physician who never practised, a farming laird intent on every improvement, a distinguished mineralogist, the founder of modern Geology. [Kay’s *Edinburgh Portraits*, i. 57.] “Dr. Black hated nothing so much as error, Dr. Hutton hated nothing so much as ignorance,” remarked Professor Playfair. Edinburgh, like all small towns, where every one knew, or thought he knew, everybody else, abounded in gossip, tinctured, however, more with good-humour than ill-nature; and it told stories of the two humorists. They had argued themselves above all popular prejudices on diet, and resolved to carry their opinions into practice. Since the ancient world partook of testaceous creatures of the sea as delicacies, why turn up the modern nose in abhorrence of those that crawl on dry land? Why not eat snails? They were wholesome; they were nutritious; and did not epicures of old prize the molluscs fed in the marble quarries of Lucca? The two emancipated philosophers determined, therefore, to have snails for supper. They sat down to the feast. Silently they looked at the dish; shyly they refrained from looking at each other; slowly each took a mouthful - their gorges rising in flat rebellion as they did so. At length Dr. Black, in slow, delicate, tentative voice, remarked in his gentlest manner, “Doctor, don’t you think they taste a little - a very little queer?” “Queer! - dawmned queer! Tak’ them awa’! Tak’ them awa’!” vociferated Dr. Hutton, rising in loathing. So began and ended their feast “after the manner of the ancients.” [Sir Walter Scott’s *Works*, xix., “Periodical Criticism.”]

Adam Smith was appreciated in Edinburgh society though not in London. He might “convey his ideas in the form of a lecture,” his voice might be harsh and his articulation thick, but there was that smile which Carlyle describes as “captivating”; those manners which were gracious; that full knowledge of things and affairs. His frequent obliviousness to what was going on around him led him into vagaries which delighted his friends, though they occasionally led him into scrapes. At dinner one day he was declaiming loudly against the conduct of a public man, when suddenly it flashed across him that the son of the person he was condemning was sitting beside him, and he was heard ejaculating to himself, “Deil care - deil care, it’s a’ true!” Placid as he was, at times his feelings could be keenly roused, and when a gentleman at Dalkeith Palace left the room, where he had been speaking of some vicious action with cynical tolerance, Adam Smith broke out: “We can breathe more freely now; that man has no indignation in him!” [D. Stewart’s *Works*, x. 187.]

Among his many friends in old Edinburgh, life was pleasant in those days.

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The Sunday suppers at Panmure House were events to remember. About eight o'clock there came the tread of well-known steps and the sound of familiar voices in the narrow wynd, and successive knocks at the door, which betokened the arrival of intimates, who came without the formality of an invitation - all being certain of a welcome at the hospitable board, with its fish and collops and roasted fowls, its punch and claret. During talk, as Blair and Hutton and Carlyle were in eager discussion, the mind of the host might wander far away to dreamland, till recalled by some loud discussion he had not followed, or uproarious mirth over a joke he could not see. Tales flitted around of the good man's abstractedness, and were retailed with unfailing zest. The familiar story was told of his walking round and round the tea-table, engrossed in talk, each time as he approached the tray unconsciously abstracting the lumps of sugar, which he munched as he took his rounds, till his spinster cousin, in agony at the "wastry," hid the bowl on her lap below the table. The company in Lady Mary Coke's drawing-room in 1767 were entertained one day by the story of Mr. Damer visiting the philosopher as he was sitting down to breakfast. As they talked Mr. Smith took a piece of bread and butter, which he rolled round and round with his fingers, and then put into the tea-pot and poured water over it. When he poured the stuff out into a cup and tasted it, he said, "it was the worst tea he had ever met with." [Lady Mary Coke's *Journal*, i. 141 (printed for private circulation).] One day he entered the Customs Office, where the portly porter in his scarlet gown gave him the usual salute with his ponderous staff. Completely forgetful that morning of a form which he had seen gone through day after day, and reminiscent of the drill of the City Train Band, of which he was captain, he fancied this was the drill-sergeant before him, and obediently raised his cane with both hands in the middle, like a musket, to return the salute, and when the porter lowered his staff and turned to the left to make way for his master, the Commissioner drew to the right, and lowered his cane to the same angle. The porter leading the way upstairs, the distraught philosopher marched formally step by step, and as the bewildered official opened the door and lowered again his staff in salute, Mr. Smith copied every motion with his cane, and bowed with equal ceremony - entering the office utterly unconscious that he had done anything unusual. [Sir Walter Scott's *Works*, xix.] Another day he was observed absently producing an exact copy of the signature of another witness to a document, instead of writing his own name.

His figure was one of the most familiar in the High Street [Kay's *Edinburgh Portraits*, i. 75.] - dressed in a light-coloured coat, in cocked hat or broad-brimmed beaver, white silk stockings, and silver-buckled shoes, a bamboo cane held over his

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shoulder, as a soldier carries his musket, with one hand, while the other might hold a bunch of flowers from his garden. Thus he walked, with eyes gazing vacantly, and lips moving as if in inaudible converse, a placid smile occasionally wreathing his countenance, his body swaying, as an acquaintance describes it, “vermicularly, as if at every step he meant to alter his direction or to turn back.” [Smellie’s *Lives of A. Smith, etc.*, p. 293.] No wonder the Musselburgh fishwife, as she watched the punctiliously attired, vacant-eyed, amiable man pass along the street, mistook him for a demented but harmless old gentleman, and sighed to her sister vender of haddocks, “Hech! and he is weel put on tae!” His very unpracticalness in little affairs of life only endeared him the more to friends, who were comforted at feeling they were at least in some things superior to a genius. In political matters he was, like most of his Scots brethren, on the side of liberalism; in religion he did not pronounce his opinions, and his friends did not question him, though they knew his convictions were deep. Doubtless he was of that religion “to which all sensible men belong,” and “which all sensible men keep to themselves.” Like Dr. Hutton, he was no great church-goer, and was addicted to going out in his sedan-chair for an airing on Sundays, while the church bells were ringing. [Clayden’s *Early Life of Rogers*, p. 97.] Yet he may have agreed with his old friend, when he said it was sometimes worth while going to the kirk merely to enjoy the pleasure of coming out. [Scott’s *Familiar Letters*, i. 301.]

Time brought many infirmities to a life so placidly spent. In 1787 he was sixty-four years old, but no longer the sturdy, strong-built man of yore. “Worn to skin and bone,” he resolved to visit London to consult his friend, Dr. William Hunter. He was able to enter society, however, where his reputation was so established, that he was as honoured by statesmen as by men of letters. A pleasant story is told how, when at a country house he met Addington, Grenville, and William Pitt, the company rose as the great Scotsman entered the room. “Be seated, gentlemen,” said he. “No,” rejoined Pitt, “we will stand till you are seated first, for we are all your scholars.” [Kay’s *Edinburgh Portraits*, i. 47.] The old man had the gratification of finding that his teaching had got apt and brilliant pupils, and posterity were to become his disciples.

The great economist’s last days were spent in revising his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* - a favourite, but not an epoch-making book. His physical strength, however, was spent; his body wasted to a shadow; his spirits had become dull and lethargic, and his friends feared that he was dying. It was then that the lovable, choleric old Dr. Adam Ferguson, hearing that the friend from whom he had been

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long estranged was ill, came, with his shivering frame clad in furs, in his chair, to wait by his bedside. Dr. Cullen attended him, and the inseparable companions, Black and Hutton, at his urgent request, a week before his death burnt a host of manuscripts which he was anxious should be destroyed. His work was done, yet he said sadly, "I meant to have done more." A curious picture of stoical philosophy and Scots stolidity is to be found at a supper the Sunday before he died. The board was spread as usual; the usual friends had come; the host received them with cheerful welcome, and the hospitable smile on his wan, sunken face. After they had supped and talked, they saw that he was wearied, and pressed him to retire; and as he left the room he paused with his hand on the door handle, and quietly said, "My friends, I fear I must leave this happy meeting, and that I shall never meet you again. But I trust we shall meet in another and a better world." [Sinclair's *Old Times and Distant Places*, p. 12, on authority of Rev. A. Alison.] This was indeed the last meeting, and it is a good instance of unemotional Scottish temperament that the genial company saw the old man withdraw, soon to die, while they remained at his table, discussing his books, his character, his wine, and the prospects of his death, when he went off to bed. Next Saturday (17th June 1790) Adam Smith was dead, and a few days after the merry guests at his supper were mourners at his grave. [Of Smith's religious opinions little is definitely known, but a passage in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* gives some indication of them. Referring to the cruel fate of the Calas family: "Religion can alone afford them every effectual comfort. She also can tell them that it is of little importance what men may think of their conduct, while the all-seeing Judge of the world approves of it. She alone can present to them a view of another world - a world of more candour, humanity, and justice than the present, where their innocence is in due time to be declared, and their virtue to be finally rewarded."]