

Ian Simpson Ross

The Life of Adam Smith.

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There seem to be three types of Adam Smith biographies. The first is celebratory, works that tell of Smith the free-market patron saint. They assume that readers are interested, not in Smith himself, but in the ideas they think he stands for. These biographies are often political in nature, although their agendas are rarely explicit, and they almost always emphasize his connection to liberty. In contrast, the second type of Smith biography, the sketch, provides an overview of his life as a preamble, mostly, to a book intended for general audiences. Sometimes these offer important links to Smith's influences, but they are context-building efforts aimed at making him a character, not a scholar. They rarely have nuance, but they provide a foundation for further exploration.

The third type of biography is one that seeks to be authoritative. It offers original historical scholarship and presents a nuanced account of Smith's life, connecting his actions to his actual text or his *oeuvre*. There are only a few of these, the original three being Dugald Stewart's (1793), John Rae's (1895), and William Scott's (1937). In 1995, Ian Simpson Ross published his own version of this type of biography, striving to create not only an account of Smith's intellectual life, but also a picture of his time and relationships as filtered through contemporary debate. It was a noteworthy effort that became, if not canonical, then essential for new scholarly work. No contemporary researcher could write on Smith without taking Ross's biography into account. In 2010, Ross issued a second edition of the biography; a much expanded, much more detailed volume whose aspirations for definitiveness are palpable.

A great deal happened in Smith studies in the fifteen years between volumes. Driven in part by Ross's own work, a new generation of Smith scholars revived the Scottish philosopher, glutting the market with commentaries on and new editions of Smith's published texts. Motivated by this revival, historians of ideas left no stone unturned. They combed through archives and attics, manuscripts and correspondences, and discovered more details about the philosopher than most could have imagined. Ross, obviously, participated in this effort, and to his credit he must have realized that his earlier biography was obsolete.

What makes the second edition of *The Life of Adam Smith* remarkable is that it strives to be two things simultaneously. First, it remains an intellectual biography, following Smith's life year by year and connecting published observations to actual events – Smith goes to Oxford, Ross quotes WN's critique of the university (67); Smith corresponds about politics in Toulouse, Ross connects it to TMS (217). While Ross is careful not to argue that any incident is the *cause* of any assertion – Ross presents his surprisingly specific sentences as commentary rather than consequence – the reader has little doubt of the author's confidence when it comes to ascertaining the lived source of Smith's conclusions. This is a biographer's conceit, of course, but it is also in opposition to two aggressive positions in commentaries on Smith. Against the continental scholars who advocate the death of the author or who ascribe to the writer a

multiplicity of divided voices, Ross clearly positions a consistent Smith who developed a single position over his lifetime. Against the analytic position that considers an argument's validity to be independent of any motivations that may have been behind its positing, Ross finds correspondences and events that are themselves evidence for particular interpretations. In short, Ross's new edition is an assertion that Smith's life is relevant, that it gives readers clues to his intent, and that his correspondence clarifies his published output.

The second aim of the book is to absorb the new scholarship into Ross's old narrative. Few paragraphs go by without parenthetical or footnoted works published after the earlier edition. These include biographical discoveries, but also conceptual analyses and interpretive claims. This intellectual biography is as much intellectual as it is biography; it is built on textual scholarship as well as historical narrative.

The Life of Adam Smith aims to be encyclopedic. The second edition is longer than the first with tighter text; in my estimation, the body alone contains 85,000 extra words. There is a new chapter on Smith's life in between his trip to France and his focus on *The Wealth of Nations*, and new scholarship holds pride of place. Ross wants *everything* included. Not necessarily every book or essay, but every idea and every detail. It contains new color plates, including a previously unseen portrait of Smith's mother, and a charming photo of Ross himself with a statue of Smith on Edinburgh's High Street. (No reasonable person would begrudge Ross his cameo appearance.) We also see diagrams of the proposed renovation of Panmure House, Smith's residence during his last twelve years, recently acquired by the Edinburgh Business School. Ross's notes have expanded from twelve pages to forty-seven, again with tighter text, and one must be amazed at Ross's exactitude as the pages turn. Is all of this necessary? Perhaps not, but its very presence is an argument for the new seriousness with which the philosophical world reads Smith.

Ross's biography is a *tour de force*, but it is also difficult to read. While the writing is clear and unobtrusive (in the way one wants), the book has shifted from being a complex intellectual biography to a dense reference text. The consequence is that Smith himself gets lost in the shuffle. The reader finishes having learned everything there is to know about Smith except what he was like as a person. We know his character but we don't know his personality; he may be our interlocutor, but he never becomes our friend. This is a striking contrast to Nicholas Phillipson's new biography *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (2012), which is warm in tone and a better advocate for Smith the human being.

Ross and Phillipson collaborated – Ross commented on two of Phillipson's drafts – and both authors acknowledge one another's efforts. But Ross's work is for scholars alone, people who already have a relationship with Smith and his texts. It does not advocate for Smith's life, it simply records it. In contrast, Phillipson's book leaves out the scholarly details and is more circumspect about its sources. Ross is transparent, while Phillipson is amiable. And in his deference to scholars, sometimes Ross's desire for inclusion gets the better of him.

It may be understandable, for example, that Ross spends several pages outlining the history of Balliol College in Oxford, since Smith spent six years studying there. But the diversion concerning John Balliol, the college's namesake, seems unnecessary (60–63), as does

the digression on François Louis Tronchin (129–132). On page 40, Ross mentions that Smith took courses in “pneumatics,” but the term isn’t explained until a few pages later. Ross also occasionally and uncharacteristically writes in his own voice, as he does when he offers a critique and defense of Smith’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Letters* (90–91), but these and similar critiques are minor, nitpicks at best, inevitable moments in a monumental journey.

The question before us, then, is: what do we get from this new biography of Smith? Other than corralling recent work, which is no mean feat, what does the reader learn from this later edition? The answer is twofold. First, Smith scholars can read their subject biographically. He is a person, with clear philosophical intent. Any interpretive schema that carefully examines his development, his motive, his correspondence, and the facts of his life, is defensible and coherent. To those who see Smith’s texts as standalone documents Ross provides a sophisticated rejoinder.

The second is a lesson: Smith is indeed a philosopher in his own right, fully integrated into the discourse of his time and acknowledged and celebrated by his interlocutors. This seems an odd message for the scholars that Ross is addressing, but they are likely the audience who most need to hear it. For much of the twentieth century, Smith was regarded as a footnote to Hume. He is one of many, more successful in his political economy than in his moral philosophy. Little is done to integrate Smith into contemporary discussion; more often than not, works on Smith are interpretive monographs, jockeying for position in the race to define *the* Smith. But Ross has shown, in fact, that Smith, like Hume and others, has, in fact, defined himself. He can stand on his own life, with his own words to defend him.

The first edition of *The Life of Adam Smith* will be seen as a transitional document. A book struggling to legitimize the emerging *Glasgow Edition* of Smith’s work, the new scholarship on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and the tentative, albeit passionate, interest of a generation of young scholars who have now moved into junior and senior positions at universities across the world. With the second edition, with the encyclopedic edition, that transition is done. The resources are present, the scholars are all accounted for, and the record is definitive. Adam Smith, the moral philosopher, is here to stay.

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