

Connecticut College Digital Commons @ Connecticut College

Economics Faculty Publications


Economics Department

Spring 1997

(Review) Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*
and Jerry Z. Muller, *Adam Smith in His Time and
Ours*

Spencer J. Pack
Connecticut College, spencer.pack@conncoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/econfacpub>

 Part of the [Economic Theory Commons](#), [Other Economics Commons](#), and the [Political Economy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pack, Spencer J. (1997). Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith* and Jerry Z. Muller, *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours*. *History of Political Economy*, 29(1): 170-2.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Economics Department at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Economics Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

(Review) Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith* and Jerry Z. Muller,
Adam Smith in His Time and Ours

Comments

Initially published in *History of Political Economy*, Spring 1997, volume 29, issue 1, pages 170-2.

© 1997 by Duke University Press

DOI: 10.1215/00182702-29-1-170

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00182702-29-1-170>

The Life of Adam Smith. By Ian Simpson Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. Pp. 495. \$35

Adam Smith In His Time And Ours. By Jerry Z. Muller. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. Pp. 272. \$14.95

One reads in the Preface to The Correspondence of Adam Smith (1977), Vol. VI of The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, that in 1965 Ernest Mossner was asked to write a life of Smith by the Adam Smith Committee of Glasgow University. As an indispensable preliminary to this task, he first edited Smith's Correspondence; he also asked Ian Simpson Ross, a Professor of English, to collaborate. Mossner (who wrote the excellent Life of David Hume) died in 1986. The long awaited biography, authored by Ross, has finally appeared.

Ross has done a great deal of work. The bibliography shows that he consulted manuscript collections from throughout Britain, as well as from the Czech Republic, France, Luxemburg, Switzerland and the U.S.; Ross consulted 44 separate 18th century newspapers and periodicals in four languages; he found 5 new letters since the 2nd edition of the Correspondence (1987), including one from the collection of the ubiquitous Sraffa; and of course there is an extensive bibliography of secondary sources.

For such extensive research the book is surprisingly short: the text is only 420 pages; there are only thirteen pages of endnotes. Approximately 15% of the text is devoted to summarizing Smith's writings.

The book is dense. Crammed with details, full of digressions, it is not a book to be skimmed, e.g.: "Flattering though Smith's

approval was, it did not detain Boswell in Glasgow long, for he ran off to London in March 1760 to become a Roman Catholic convert, contemplate entering a monastery abroad, and settle for libertinism, all within three weeks (Pottle, 1965; 1966: 230-53)."(134) One wishes for a more judicious use of endnotes for these sorts of digressions.

Ross guides us through Smith's economics with an unsteady hand. Given his writing style, some of his sentences are disorienting. For example, in describing problems with the Ayr Bank, Ross writes: "As the bank got going, there was an economic crisis in Scotland, to which Hume alluded, arising from investments outrunning savings, a fall in the price of commodities such as linen, and a 'spirit of overtrading'". (242)

This sentence could conceivably make sense, provided one came up with appropriate (unorthodox) definitions of savings and investments, explained why too much investments would cause a crisis, and explained why a fall in the price of commodities would occur during a time of overtrading. Ross does not do this.

The book suffers from problems of proportionality. Ross summarizes everything Smith wrote. Yet, there is relatively little on Smith's economics. For example, Ross spends about 5 pages summing up The Wealth of Nations. This is only two more pages than he uses to comment upon the literary gossip contained in the Bee by the pseudonymous "Amicus". (The editors of Smith's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres admit that "the moral propriety of reprinting yet again the gossip of Amicus may rightly be

questioned" ("Introduction": 33)). A biography with such little discussion of Smith's political economy is surprising.

The only other full scale biography on Smith is by the journalist (not the Canadian economist) John Rae. First published in 1895, this 440 page text was reprinted with Jacob Viner's 138 page introduction in 1965. Ross scarcely mentions this book which bears the same title as his: Life of Adam Smith. A more critical encounter with it would have been appreciated.

Ross's work is meant to supersede Rae/Viner as the definitive Smith biography. I think it will. Nonetheless, comparison with what, e.g., Viner wrote on Smith's relations with Edmund Burke (23-33) and Smith on pin-making (103-109) with Ross's handling of the same topics (355-358; 273) suggests that Ross's picture is not necessarily the more sophisticated one.

The best part of the book is the last third where Ross details Smith's life after having written the Wealth of Nations. The surprising Smith leads a rather quiet life as Commissioner of Customs. Here Ross is most persuasive and informative, no doubt due to his intimate familiarity with Smith's correspondence, as well as his dogged pursuit of all Smithian anecdotes.

Nonetheless, Ross relates all anecdotes without sufficiently challenging or assessing their validity. All interested in Smith's life will need to consult this work; yet, let the consumer beware.

Mention should, I suppose, be made of Smith's sex life. Shortly after relating an anecdote that Smith could not endure a French woman who had amorous designs upon him, Ross writes, "it is

to be feared that the biographer can do little more with the topic of Smith's sex life than contribute a footnote to the history of sublimation (214)." Recall that conviction of sodomy in 18th century England was punishable by hanging; conviction of attempted sodomy could get one sentenced to the pillory, fined and imprisoned. (Norton: 130). Given the legal, moral, and social climate regarding gays, Smith's extreme discretion, and other hints in his life, the theory that Smith was indeed gay merits serious consideration; perhaps even investigation. I leave it for others to consider what effect (if any) this could have had upon Smith's theological, moral, legal, and economic views.¹

Jerry Muller's book, Adam Smith: In His Time and Ours was originally published by the Free Press in 1993; Princeton University Press has now reissued it in a paperback edition.

This is a fine, balanced overview of Smith's social theory. Muller, a historian, is a lucid writer who is quite good on the historical background to Smith's world. Muller emphasizes that Smith wished to design institutions to make people more decent; Muller calls this the institutional direction of the passions.

Muller attempts to survey a tremendous amount of material; he generally succeeds. There is very little on Smith's technical economic analysis; nonetheless, Muller has a good grasp of Smith's general political economy and general social theory.

Part One, "Adam Smith in his Time" has three chapters

outlining Smith's life, mid-18th century British society, and the intellectual background to Smith's thought.

Part II, "Designing the Decent Society", has short, generally effective chapters on Smith's views of the mercantile system, social science as the anticipation of the unanticipated, commercial humanism as Smith's civilizing project, the impartial spectator, the historical and institutional foundations of commercial society, the moral balance sheet of commercial society, the state, the sociology of religion, and moral and political leadership in commercial society.

Muller's system breaks down in Part III "From Smith's Time to Ours". He has a chapter where he unsuccessfully attempts to trace the entire history of critics to Smith in just 8 pages; and other unduly sketchy chapters on unanticipated consequences of Smith's rhetoric, and the "timeless and the timely" in Smith's thought.

An entertaining opinionated 20 page "Guide to Further Reading" concludes this accessible work.

1. On Keynes work and his sex life, see, e.g. Hession.

References:

Hession, Charles H., 1984. John Maynard Keynes: A Personal Biography. New York: Macmillan.

Norton, Rictor. 1992. Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830. London: GMP Publishers LTD.

Spencer J. Pack
Department of Economics
Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut 06405