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The Biography of Quesnay

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THE BIOGRAPHY OF QUESNAY.¹

By a superficial observer the increase of biographical literature in economics might be taken for a symptom of scientific decadence, for a sign of inability to grapple with the great actual problems of the age. To any one, however, who is desirous to clear the ground from errors which bar the way towards economic knowledge, the first rule of criticism is to know the conditions which gave origin to economic doctrines, and the import they had for economic practice. There are plenty of practical sciences, the formation of which has been due to the exigencies of practical life; but there is no theoretical science, the growth of which has been so deeply influenced by the varying character of social interests and institutions, as political economy. Its doctrines, therefore, cannot be studied without consideration of the historical conditions to which they gave abstract expression, nor apart from the literary and personal surroundings of their originators.

From such a standpoint of realistic analysis of our scientific inventory neither the hero-worship of the past, nor the unhistorical attitude of many critics of economic doctrines, who sometimes condemn, sometimes modernise them so as to be no longer recognisable, seems to be adequate. Viewed in this light, the history of economics needs yet to be written, and those patient investigators who are modestly working in this field, are slowly contributing towards this performance.

I may support this assertion by quoting two works which have been reviewed in this Journal: Mr. Rae's *Life of Adam Smith* and Lord Fitzmaurice's *Life of Sir William Petty*. None of these biographies treats at length and *ex professo* the economic doctrine of these economists; yet both give a vivid description of that economic life in which these authors took active part, and they reflect thereby more light on them than by philosophic dissertations on their achievements, or by mere extracts from their works. The same aim is pursued by Professor Oncken in collecting the materials for a biography of the founder of the Physiocratic School; and although his researches purport to be only preliminary, similar results can be drawn from his first instalment of a life of Quesnay. The author of the *Tableau Économique* will henceforth neither be considered as the revealer of an eternal truth, as he appeared to his proselytes, nor as an abstruse closet-reasoner, engaged in discovering an economic system of his own. His life and his time had trained him towards his economic work. We are initiated into the occupation not only of his father, but his ancestors; they were farmers (*laboureurs*), his father at the same time merchant, and sometimes tithe-collector of the Abbey of Merey de Saint Magloire. From

¹ *Zur Biographie des Stifters der Physiokratie François Quesnay.* Von August Oncken. Abteilung I. Quesnay's voröconomistische Lebensperiode. Sonderabdruck aus der Vierteljahrsschrift für Staats- und Volkswirtschaft, etc. (Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld.)

the documents of the sale of this farm (p. 14) we get some glimpses of the agricultural character of the native village. A gardener is said to have increased Quesnay's love for agriculture and for study by handing him the work of Liébaut, *La Maison rustique*. Having decided to become a surgeon, he goes to Paris; and being obliged to earn his bread as an engraver, he gains practical experience of artisan corporations. His principal studies are however not neglected; philosophy and mathematics attract him. Returning as a master surgeon to Mantes, he takes part in 1725 at a meeting for protesting against a new *taille*, and proposing an excise instead of it—an attitude very different from what might be expected from the author of the Single tax (pp. 30–1), but proving his early practical interest in the system of taxation. Even during his medical career one of his patrons, the Duke of Villeroy, entrusts him with the office of 'commissioner of war,' responsible for arrangements for the proper provision and supply of grain for the army (p. 43). Another point of considerable interest is the connexion between Quesnay's views on natural science and those on economics. His biographer therefore dwells at length on his medical career, his writings, and his activity as secretary and demonstrator of the Academy of Medicine, by which he won the honours of foreign fellowship of the Royal Society (1735) and of knighthood (p. 71). It is very instructive to study Quesnay's particular attitude towards current theories of method. He expresses himself very strongly both on the abuse of metaphysical theories and on mere routine in this domain. The experimental method, based on the laws of physical science, is professed by him; and the idea of a natural order, maintained by these laws, and embracing also the moral and social world, easily evolves from his natural philosophy. The parallel development of pure science and economics can thus be observed, and Professor Oncken lays stress on it, in spite of its having been recently contested (pp. 78, 79 note).

From a human standpoint it is extremely comforting to see a great thinker remaining independent in his convictions and his character in the position of a royal physician at the court of the Marquise de Pompadour. A proverb says, that no man is a hero to his valet; but Quesnay comes intact from the memoirs of a chamber-maid, Madame Du Hausset.

In every respect therefore we are likely to receive a more life-like impression of the evolution of economics from such biographical work done by trained economists, than by historians who make abstractions of economics. In the case of Quesnay, the results which his biographer has hitherto attained give room for the best hopes of the continuation of his work.

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