

Features

Washington's unsung patron

A new biography reveals details about the previously obscure figure whose name is now known to millions in the form of the Smithsonian Institution. **Nigel Williams** reports.

The Lost World of James Smithson
Heather Ewing
Bloomsbury: ISBN 9780747576532

No visitor to the US capital, Washington DC, can fail to notice the dominance downtown of the Smithsonian Institution. Redstone building after redstone building comprise a series of museums and facilities across the centre of town, which show off American history, natural history and science and attract millions of visitors each year.

But what is much less known is that the Smithsonian Institution exists as a result of the bequest of the illegitimate son of an English duke, who embraced the nineteenth-century modernity America promised while much in Europe seemed to be in upheaval. And, although he widely travelled in Europe, he never himself set foot in America.

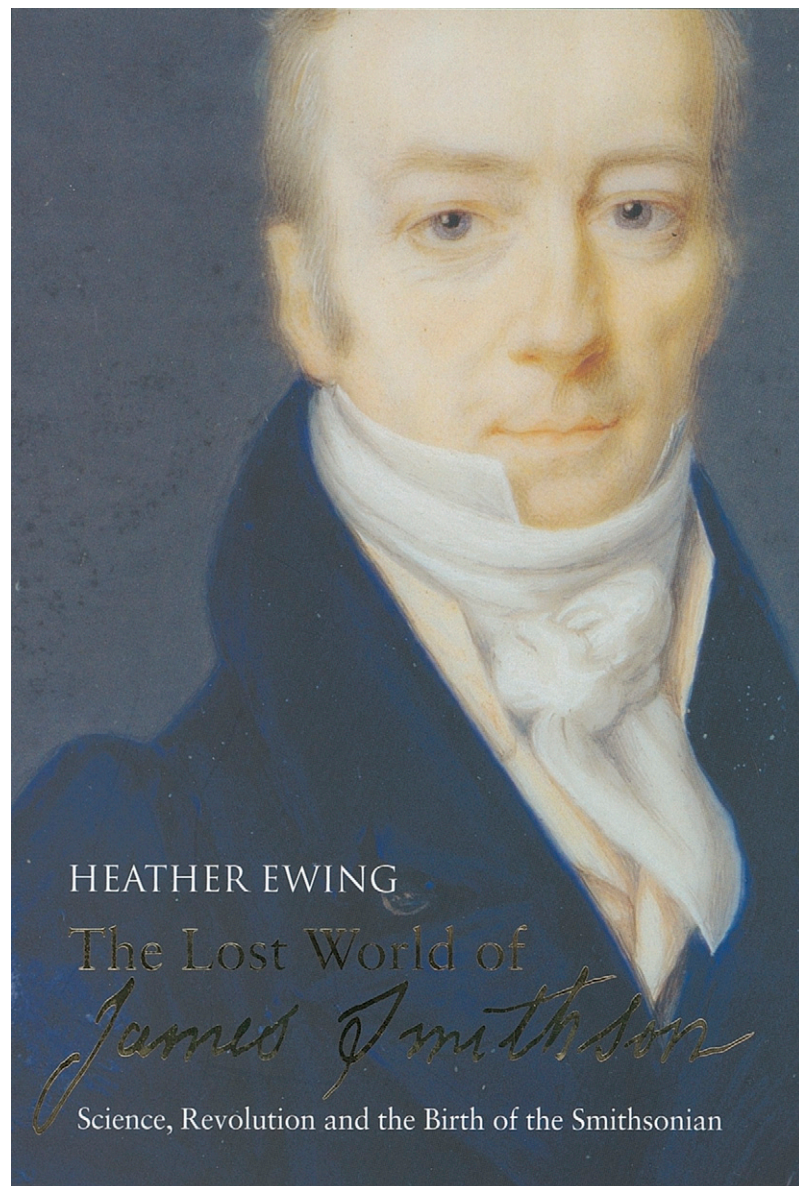
"As an architectural historian at the Smithsonian in the early 1990s, I walked past Smithson's tomb at the entrance to the old Castle buildings almost daily. Like most of the tens of millions of visitors to the museums each year, however, I hardly cast a glance in his direction," writes Heather Ewing, Smithson's new biographer. The man who provided the vital bequest that led to the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution has remained a figure in the shadows, partly as a result of his unorthodox English life, and partly as a result of a major fire at the Smithsonian which destroyed much of his collection of papers and artefacts.

"So little was known of him, and so colourless were the existing biographical accounts, that he remained remote, imaginable only as a caricature: a periwigged effete with a handsome mineral cabinet and a pendant for

gambling," writes Ewing. What is known is the quirky story of Smithson's posthumous arrival in Washington — the famed inventor Alexander Graham Bell and his wife exhumed the body from a condemned Genoa cemetery in a blinding snowstorm on

the last day of 1903 — and the ensuing debate over how best to memorialize him.

With each generation's interpretation of Smithson's mandate, the Smithsonian has spread into new buildings up and down the Mall and beyond; the fragments of Smithson's life have scattered too, to distant corners of the institution. Smithson's personal collection of books, the



Into the limelight: The new biography reveals much previously unknown about James Smithson, the British founder of the Smithsonian Institution.

only substantial material that has survived the fire of 1865, sits in a state-of-the-art facility in the basement of the National Museum of Natural History. The collection is a working library, with many of the books annotated. But the library is also surprisingly limited in size and scope, totalling only 115 volumes. It is missing many of the standard philosophical and scientific works one might expect of someone once described as “a gentleman of extensive acquirements and liberal views, derived from a long and intimate acquaintance with the world.”

The rest of the material is at the Smithsonian Archives: three original letters from Smithson, acquired since the fire, photocopies of about a dozen more from other repositories, and a handful of Smithson’s notes, including a few draft catalogues of his mineral collection and some memoranda from experiments.

Mostly, the archives contain a record of the search for Smithson, a long trail of dead-end enquiries made by various officials in the years since the fire. As long ago as 1880 the Smithsonian concluded that after “unusual exertions” they had collected “all the information likely to be obtained”.

But Ewing has attempted to uncover Smithson’s story from the libraries and archives of Europe and the US. The lack of love letters and minimal evidence of friendships have led to conclusions that such intimacies must not have existed. In the absence of proof to the contrary, Smithson has been labelled an eccentric recluse; his science has been dismissed as dabbling and dilettantish, and the motivation behind his extraordinary bequest deemed ultimately unknowable. He lies now virtually forgotten, while his name, in the form of the Smithsonian, has become one of the most famous in the world.

Ewing followed hundreds of leads from the astronomical observatory in Krakow to the University of Abo in Finland; she queried all the regional academies of science in France and blanketed Jersey in search of the family papers of Smithson’s



On show: ‘Diffusion of knowledge amongst men’, one of the current galleries at the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. (Photo: Smithsonian Institution.)

Oxford tutor. Most of these letters yielded nothing. But slowly, letters from Smithson did appear, as Ewing’s knowledge of his network grew, mentions of Smithson emerged in the letters and diaries of his friends and acquaintances. She found him acting as a kind of scientific colleague for Lord Bristol, a profligate earl-bishop, in Italy around the time of the great Siena meteorite fall of 1794, and complaining of his health at a party in Paris with the German explorer Alexander von Humboldt after the restoration of the Bourbons in 1814. In Copenhagen she discovered records relating to Smithson’s arrest as a prisoner of war in 1807. And in Paris she discovered details of someone, a French policeman, who trailed Smithson through the inns of the Rhine in 1805, when he was considered a “vagabonde d’intrigues”.

As these finds piled up, a new portrait began to emerge, Ewing notes. “The protean blur of Smithson came into better focus, and a man of infectious exuberance and ambition replaced the retiring loner.”

The discovery of a series of extraordinary lawsuits at the Public Record Office concerning Smithson’s mother, Elizabeth Macie, shed light on the emotional forces that shaped his outlook. She sued an extraordinary number of people in addition to her

husband: her sister, her architect, multiple cousins, and even an illiterate farm tenant. Smithson’s mother had long been obscure, Ewing writes. “Nothing has been learned of her history”, the Smithsonian nineteenth century biography read. “From the details of these suits she emerged all of a sudden as haughty and tempestuous, a domineering, emotionally erratic presence for her fatherless son,” Ewing writes.

It has often been argued that Smithson’s fortune came from his mother. But these lawsuits exposed Elizabeth Macie’s profligacy and made clear that she left her son much less than she might have. Her estate at probate was valued at less than £10,000; the gift that established the Smithsonian totalled more than ten times that. Smithson, it seems, made his own fortune: he took a small inheritance from his mother and, through a lifetime of shrewd management and investment, turned it into the largesse that was bequeathed to the US.

Chemistry was the cutting-edge field of Smithson’s era and his formative years unfolded in the midst of unprecedented discovery, much of it linked to chemical advances.

Where a majority of the English reacted with fear and repression to the political and social upheavals of the late eighteenth century, Smithson was

part of a small elite who looked at the factories sprouting up across England's green hills and saw not dark satanic mills, but rather industry and the prospect of improvement. In the French revolution they did not find a threat to Britain's security, but confirmation that even the most hierarchical of societies could be transformed.

"The present, beyond all former times," as one of Smithson's friends said, "teems with wonders." They also brought a belief that it was scientists who would dominate the hierarchy of the future. Many of the men leading the charge for modernity, like Smithson, stood on the margins of society; in England they were the chemists and industrialists of the provinces, Protestant dissenters for the most part, excluded from the Anglican and aristocratic Establishment. Science for them became the means of overthrowing the system as it existed, of replacing a corrupt order based on superstition and inherited privilege with one that rewarded talent and merit.

Even as Europe was engulfed in war, they proclaimed themselves citizens of the globe and pledged their allegiance first of all to truth and reason. Their highest aspiration was to be a benefactor of all mankind.

And in America's unprecedented system of government, founded upon the rights of man, where each person was to be valued for his contribution rather than his pedigree, they saw the future. In this light, Smithson's bequest of an "establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men", entrusted to the United States for its execution, appears from a new perspective.

"The mapping of Smithson's world reveals the crucible that he passed through, and how profoundly affected he was by the culture of improvement in the late eighteenth century. Although it was 1846 before Congress passed the act establishing the Smithsonian Institution, the ideas that fashioned it were spawned more than half a century earlier. "My name will live in the memory of men," Smithson wrote.

Sea change

Researchers seeking to help re-establish depleted fisheries face a new problem of unexpected heterogeneity amongst ocean stocks that may make the task more difficult. **Nigel Williams** reports.

The Grand Banks off the north-east of America were once the greatest cod fishery in the world, supporting local communities and many much further afield in Europe and the Caribbean. But overfishing led to its collapse, and, in spite of

many conservation efforts to restore it, cod remain pretty much absent and the fishery is nothing compared to its former productivity.

In a new study, Jeffrey Hutchings at Dalhousie University in Halifax, and colleagues elsewhere in Canada, report in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B (published online) a surprising variation in traits amongst cod found in different parts of the Atlantic ocean.

The authors find that the widely distributed, broadcast spawning cod with apparently high dispersal capabilities



Mixed: A new study reveals differing traits across populations of Atlantic cod. (Picture: Photolibrary.)