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ESSAYS

PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY

BY

ADAM SMITH, K.

LL.D., F.R.S.,

AUTHOR OF THE "INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND CAUSES OF THE WEALTH
OF NATIONS."

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE.

ADAM SMITH, the author of these Essays and of the 'Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,' was born at Kirkaldy, June 5, 1723, a few months after the death of his father. He was a sickly child, and indulged by his mother, who was the object of his filial gratitude for sixty years. When about three years old, and at the house of Douglass of Stratherny, his mother's brother, he was carried off by tinkers or gipsies, but soon recovered from them. At the burgh school of his native town he made rapid progress, and soon attracted notice by his passion for books, and by the extraordinary powers of his memory. His weakness of body prevented him joining in athletic sports, but his generous and friendly temperament made him a favourite with his schoolmates; and he was noted then, as through after life, for absence in company and a habit of speaking to himself when alone. From the grammar school of Kirkaldy, he was sent, in 1737, to the University of Glasgow, whence, in 1740, he went to Baliol College, Oxford, enjoying an exhibition on the Snell foundation. When at Glasgow College, his favourite studies were mathematics and natural philosophy, but that did not long divert his mind from pursuits more congenial to him, more particularly the political history of mankind, which gave scope to the power of his comprehensive genius, and gratified his ruling passion of contributing to the happiness and the improvement of society. To his early taste for Greek generally, may be due the clearness and fulness with which he states his political reasonings. At Oxford he employed himself frequently in the practice of translation, with a view to the improvement of his own style, and used to commend such exercises to all who cultivate the art of composition. He also cultivated with the greatest care the study of languages; and his knowledge of them led him to a peculiar experience in everything that could illustrate the institutions, the manners, and the ideas of different ages and nations.

After a residence at Oxford of seven years, he returned to Kirkaldy, and lived two years with his mother, engaged in studies, but without any fixed plan for his future life. He had been originally destined for the Church of England; but not finding the ecclesiastical profession suitable to his taste, he took chance of obtaining some of those moderate preferments, to which literary attainments lead in Scotland. Removing to Edinburgh in 1748, he read lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres, under the patronage of Lord Kames; and when in Edinburgh became intimate with David Hume.

In 1751 he was elected Professor of Logic in the University of Glasgow; and, the year following, he became Professor of Moral Philosophy there; a situation he held for thirteen years, and used to look back on as the most useful and happy of his life; and, though but a narrow scene for his ambition, may have led to the future eminence of his literary character. In delivering his lectures, Mr. Smith trusted

almost entirely to extemporary elocution. His manner, though not graceful, was plain and unaffected, and he never failed to interest his hearers. Each discourse consisted commonly of several distinct propositions, which he successively endeavoured to prove and illustrate. At first he often appeared to speak with hesitation; but, as he advanced, the matter seemed to crowd upon him, his manner became warm and animated, and his expression easy and fluent. His reputation as a philosopher attracted a multitude of students from a great distance to the University; and those branches of science which he taught became fashionable, and his opinions were the chief topics of discussion in the clubs and literary societies of Glasgow. While Adam Smith became thus eminent as a public lecturer, he was gradually laying the foundation of a more extensive reputation by preparing for the press his *System of Morals*; and the first edition of his *Essays* appeared in 1757, under the title of *THE THEORY OF MORAL SENTIMENTS*.

Of this essay, Dugald Stewart remarks, 'that whatever opinion we may entertain of the justness of its conclusions, it must be allowed to be a singular effort of invention, ingenuity, and subtilty; that it contains a large mixture of important truth, and has had the merit of directing the attention of philosophers to a view of human nature, which had formerly in a great measure escaped their notice; and no work, undoubtedly, can be mentioned, ancient or modern, which exhibits so complete a view of those facts with respect to our moral perceptions, which it is one great object of this branch of science to refer to their general laws; and well deserves the careful study of all whose taste leads them to prosecute similar enquiries. These facts are presented in the most happy and beautiful lights; and when the subject leads him to address the imagination and the heart, the variety and felicity of his illustrations, the richness and fluency of his eloquence; and the skill with which he wins the attention and commands the passions of his readers, leave him, among our English moralists, without a rival. Towards the close of 1763, Mr. Smith arranged to visit the continent with the Duke of Buccleugh, returning to London in 1766. For the next ten years he lived quietly with his mother at Kirkaldy; and in 1776, accounted to the world for his long retreat, by the publication of his '*INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND CAUSES OF THE WEALTH OF NATIONS*.' In 1778, Mr. Smith was appointed a Commissioner of Customs in Scotland, the pecuniary emoluments of which were considerable. In 1784, he lost his mother. In 1788, his cousin, Miss Douglass, died, to whom he had been strongly attached; and in July, 1790, he died, having, a short while before, in conversation with his friend Riddell, regretted that '*HE HAD DONE SO LITTLE*.'

[Above biographic notes and literary opinions have been abridged from a paper on '*The Life and Writings of Adam Smith*,' by Professor Dugald Stewart, of Edinburgh, 1793.—A. M.]