

Adam Smith and the pursuit of perfect liberty

by James Buchan

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Writing the biography of a great intellectual figure poses particular challenges. Other things being equal, focusing on the life should illuminate rather than distract from explicating the subject's thought. But some subjects are more equal than others.

For instance situating Oscar Wilde's plays within his life adds immeasurably to their power. In Wilde's play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lady Windermere is warned by someone she does not realise is actually her mother that she is 'on the brink of ruin ... on the brink of a hideous precipice'. This might be melodrama. But knowing how the comment presages Wilde's later disgrace transforms it. Seeing it on stage made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Knowing Wilde's passions makes his paradoxes seem less like facile jokes—and more like depth charges.

Then again, as Wilde said, he put his talent into his work and his genius into his life. The problem for James Buchan, the latest biographer of Adam Smith, is that Smith did things the other way round. He put his genius into his work. But his life? Like any life, it has moments which touch us—his father died before he was born leaving Smith to be raised as a sickly child by his mother who became the love of his life—but we can only speculate about how they might have influenced his work. For apart from his work, he left behind so little else to go on.

Fitting though it is for Smith—a high priest of self-command—it offers slim pickings for the biographer. Despite his eminence in his own time, there are no paintings of him. Sex and romance rate barely a mention in the million odd words he wrote about society. A man who had sixteen volumes of draft material burned before his death managed also to keep the prying eyes of posterity away from more private details. Apart from his mother, were there any other loves of his life? If so, were they women or men? We can

only guess.

The book's blurb and the author's introduction focus on two themes. Firstly, that Smith scholarship has been beset with anachronism—that tendency we have to judge the past by the standards and concepts of the present. Secondly, that Smith's two great books were part of a larger whole which Smith never completed. Oddly however, neither theme is well developed.

Anachronism in studies of Smith has been rife. On the one hand, economists projected the technical concerns of their own time onto Smith's writings trying, for instance, to divine the extent to which his words 'anticipated' perfect competition. On the other, ideologues have always tried to claim Smith for their own side in contemporary debates. Yet these questions are not, and cannot really be, about Smith. Rather, they are about us.

Buchan's tilting at anachronism may not be original. But given the frequency with which this champion of the poor and the weak is presented as the apostle of the rich and the strong, and the various opposing attempts to colonise Smith for the left, it is always timely.

Thus Buchan sets out the ideas of Smith's two great books, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, with a fine regard for Smith's intentions—helping the reader grasp Smith on his own terms. This is no mean feat. But greater depth of discussion, including perhaps more explicit debunking of some central misunderstandings about Smith, is often necessary when one is battling ingrained preconceptions as one is with Smith. Not only would this have driven the point home about Smith, it would have helped the naïve reader

appreciate the magnitude of Buchan's achievement.

I read intently to see how Buchan would convey the poignant story of the great project slipping away from Smith. But the record doesn't allow much more than the reporting of a sentence or two from Smith before and after it had all become too late.

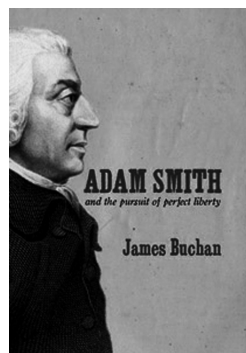
At least in the hands of Buchan (and of Smith's other biographers) we do get some picture of Smith's qualities. Dr Samuel Johnson considered him a 'dull dog', perhaps because he felt Smith a poor conversationalist, alternating between disengaged silence and monopolising the discussion, but perhaps also because of some unkind remarks Smith made about Johnson's dictionary.

On the other hand, Smith had great solicitude for those to whom he felt he owed a duty, was honest and honourable to a fault in his financial dealings, and was also a secret and substantial benefactor. He was a perfectionist working slowly and painfully in between debilitating bouts of melancholia and hypochondria.

Buchan often offers tokens of insight into Smith's personal life. Smith's fatherlessness comes to the fore where Buchan quotes the one time, late in his life, when Smith's final draft of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* contemplated the abyss of a 'fatherless world'—before reaffirming his faith that it was not so. Buchan quotes Smith's letter to his longtime friend and publisher William Strahan upon the death of his mother. The passage concludes 'I cannot help feeling ... [this] final separation ... as a very heavy stroke upon me'. Buchan calls this 'unbearable'. It's also characteristically emotionally restrained.

However, a collection of sketches and anecdotes doesn't really help us engage with Smith and his ideas. All the while Buchan is eager—too eager?—to entertain. But if our interest is to hold over this slim book we need to be engaged in some *process of development* whether it be the drama of Smith's life, the development of his values and character, or the unfolding of his intellectual thought.

Try as he might, Buchan can't make



up for this deficit of real engagement with catchy chapter headings, 'Cave, Tree, Fountain', 'Pen-knives and snuff-boxes', 'Infidel with a bag wig' or 'Baboons in the orchard'. I'm not sure it had to be this way.

The key to writing about Smith well, I think, is to remember that he kept his genius for his work—not his life. Here he is in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* expounding the closest of all human bonds:

What are the pangs of a mother, when she hears the moanings of her infant that during the agony of disease cannot express what it feels? In her idea of what it suffers, she joins, to its real helplessness, her own consciousness of that helplessness, and her own terrors for the unknown consequences of its disorder; and out of all these, forms, for her own sorrow, the most complete image of misery and distress. The infant, however, feels only the uneasiness of the present instant, which can never be great. With regard to the future, it is perfectly secure, and in its thoughtlessness and want of foresight, possesses an antidote against fear and anxiety, the great tormentors of the human breast, from which reason and philosophy will, in vain, attempt to defend it, when it grows up to a man.

So much for *homo economicus*. Smith's life and his love are here, I think, and, thus transmuted, they speak to us directly. For some of us it gets that hair standing up on the back of our necks.

Reviewed by Nicholas Gruen

Vital Signs, Vibrant Society: Securing Australia's Economic and Social Wellbeing

by Craig Emerson

UNSW Press, Sydney, 2006

256pp \$29.95

ISBN 0868408832

A quick scan of Craig Emerson's biography on his parliamentary website (or his more straightforward Wikipedia entry) reveals a tantalising background. This ambitious Representative of a booming South East Queensland seat gained a PhD in economics from ANU and advised on the subject within the Hawke government as well as at the United Nations. Emerson has also been the Director-General of the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage. His book, therefore, promises to be the perfect mix for a thoughtful analysis of the challenges, as well as the opportunities, facing Australia this century. Economic growth, check! Environmental sustainability, check! Add to that the fact that Emerson is an ALP MP and the third pillar—social justice—is checked.

To fans of the genre, *Vital Signs, Vibrant Society* appears as the natural successor to the excellent *Imagining Australia* by Andrew Leigh and fellow Australian Harvard alumni. Here are similarly bold ideas, espoused by an author sufficiently versed in parliamentary realities to offer a feasible manifesto. So, what is the basic premise of this self-styled 'plan for Australia'?

In a move that must have pleased the publisher's marketers, the scope is conveniently encapsulated in an executive summary-style, easy to remember roll call of the main ideas. The five I's, which form the backbone of the plan for the country's sustainable and equitable prosperity are: intellect, ideas, initiative, infrastructure and

immigrants. It is immediately clear that Emerson sees the best way forward as one that rests heavily on an exultation of tertiary education and tertiary industries, supported by governments disposed to fiscal nation-building, with a dose of 'populate or perish' narrative thrown into the mix.

The chapters that follow provide an almost Keatingesque list of suggestions and calls to action, albeit largely limited, or closely linked, to the economic dimension. Like Keating the Treasurer, without the social ideas of Keating the Prime Minister deemed controversial for Australia of both 1996 and 2006, Emerson provides a mostly appealing, if not always convincing, call for a redoubling of reformist efforts. *Vital Signs, Vibrant Society* also paints John Howard as a weak economic reformer in areas from productivity improvements and tax policies to innovation incentives and free trade.

Many academic economists may agree that the material prosperity coinciding with the Howard decade is more a consequence of the Hawke/Keating period and a by-product of the global economic times suiting him, rather than Howard's initiatives to reform the economy in line with shifts in global capitalism. However, Emerson is not entirely in line with the academic left. While singing the praises of the nation's universities and lambasting the apparent hollowing out of the sector on this government's watch, *Vital Signs, Vibrant Society* does not see Australia's economic future as exclusively, or even mainly, based on the mental efforts of urban creative class cosmocrats. Rather, there is a vital role in Emerson's vibrant Australia for thriving, ecologically-sustainable primary industry exporters and a robust, competitive manufacturing sector, a prospect sure to please the unionists.

