EDITORIAL NOTE:

Due to the increased cost of printing and shortage of funds the Scottish Tradition will appear until further notice once a year. The issue will be enlarged to include as many articles as possible.

Political Themes
in the Correspondence of Adam Smith

To amplify discussion of politics in eighteenth-century Scotland, this paper proposes to examine certain themes in the correspondence of Adam Smith. These themes are as follows: the incorporating Union with England of 1707, which gave Scotland the political system which endured for better or worse until 1832; the constituency politics which arose from that system; the political crisis of the American War of Independence and its aftermath; and the issue of free trade for Ireland, involving the British government's role with respect to the economic order. By way of introduction, it is appropriate to observe that Smith's advancement in life arose in part from the politics of the management of Scottish affairs flowing from the Union: his family connexions with the house of Argyll guaranteed that at critical junctures his merits would be rewarded. Also, he had both a theoretical and a practical interest in politics. It was one of the subjects included in the discipline of moral philosophy, which he professed at Glasgow, and he was consulted by successive governments about political matters, some of them to be sure, intertwined with economics. Finally, among his scholars, both specifically taught by him at Glasgow, and more broadly those exposed to his ideas through their dissemination in the Wealth of Nations, were the leading politicians of the 1780s and succeeding decades. Indeed, a first generation of the latter type: Loughborough, Dundas, and Pitt, were the parliamentary leaders most alarmed about the British Convention of Reformers at Edinburgh in 1793, and those most determined to retain power and crush the radical movements of the time.
second generation — taught the principles of the Wealth of Nations at Edinburgh by Dugald Stewart — helped to bring in the Reform Bill of 1832, which many believe staved off a Jacobin revolution in Britain; some representative names in this connexion are Palmerston, Lansdowne, and Lord John Russell, also the stars of the Edinburgh Review — Jeffrey, Horner, Brougham, and Sidney Smith.3

Adam Smith, of course, took the view that the Revolution settlement of 1689, through establishing the Protestant succession to the throne, had upheld the essential rights of individuals. This emerges in a letter written to William Strahan, printer, publisher, and MP, on 4 April 1760, in which the latter is asked to read over the Theory of Moral Sentiments and suggest corrections for a second edition, concerning which Smith himself would have the last say:

If ... you could induce yourself to take this trouble, you would oblige me greatly: I know how much I shall be benefitted and I shall at the same time preserve the precious right of private judgement for the sake of which our forefathers kicked out the Pope and the Pretender. I believe you to be much more infallible than the Pope, but as I am a Protestant my conscience makes me scruple to submit to an unscriptural authority.

The mention of the Pope and the Pretender leads Smith to ask Strahan if he has read a recently-published book: The Secret History of Colonel Hooke’s Negotiations in Scotland, in Favour of the Pretender; in 1707 (London, 1760). Nathaniel Hooke, more an agent of Louis XIV than a fervent Jacobite, was engaged from 1705 on seeking to align support in Scotland for the Old Pretender, James III, on the basis of opposition to the projected Union with England under Queen Anne. Smith’s letter continues with a shrewd analysis of the circumstances of the Union:

Nothing, however, appears to me more excusable than the disaffection of Scotland at that time. The Union was a measure from which infinite Good has been derived to this country. The Prospect of that good, however, must then have appeared very remote and very uncertain. The immediate effect of it was to hurt the interest of every single order of men in the country. The dignity of the nobility was undone by it. The greater part of the Gentry who had been accus-
tomed to represent their own country in its own Parliament were cut out for ever from all hopes of representing it in a British Parliament. Even the merchants seemed to suffer at first. The trade to the Plantations was, indeed, opened to them. But that trade was a trade which they knew nothing about: the trade they were acquainted with, that to France, Holland and the Baltic, was laid under new embarassments which almost totally annihilated the two first and most important branches of it. The Clergy too, who were then far from insignificant, were alarmed about the Church. No wonder if at that time all orders of men conspired in cursing a measure so hurtful to their immediate interest. The views of their Posterity are now very different; but those views could be seen by but few of our forefathers, by those few in but a confused and imperfect manner.4

Modern scholarship tends to confirm Smith’s viewpoint: the short-run economic consequences of the Union helped to foment political opposition to it, whereas the long-run results seemed to be beneficial, always conceding that the economic growth of the second half of the eighteenth century in Scotland in relation to the Union might have been post hoc rather than propter hoc.5 That hopes for advantageous trade were uppermost in the minds of the proponents of the Union is neatly revealed in some words written in November 1705 by the fifth Earl of Roxburghe (created first Duke, 1707), one of the leading members of the Squadron, who had become convinced that the Court was determined to push through a Union: ‘The motives will be, Trade with most, Hanover with some, ease and security with others’.6 The Parliament at Westminster, however, did not see things through Scottish eyes and acted in ways inimical to Scotland’s economic interests as Queen Anne’s reign wore on. Thus, a bill aimed at encouraging the Scottish linen trade was defeated by the exertions of the Irish linen lobby. In defiance of the terms of the Treaty of Union, Parliament proposed in 1712 to levy the Malt Tax on Scotland. Also, Scotland was brought within the system of English excise and customs regulations, which burdened normal trade links with the Continent. Instead of producing higher tax returns, this change pushed more people into smuggling activities, which proved highly profitable throughout the eighteenth century, until the younger Pitt took Smith’s advice about lowering duties to the point at which the dangers and outlays of smuggling were clearly greater than
the yields.7

Smith was right not only about the Union hurting the merchants to begin with, but also on the matter of the upset to the status of the nobility and gentry. From his vantage point as an English agent in Edinburgh during the time of the Union, Defoe was a witness to the unsettling effect on the upper classes of the removal of the seat of political power to England: 'The great men are posting to London for places and honours, every man full of his own merit and afraid of everyone near him: I never saw so much trick, sham, pride, jealousy and cutting of friends' throats as there is among the noblemen'.8 The reduction in numbers of MPs, from 159 in the Scottish Parliament to 45 Scottish representatives in the Union one, meant an immediate diminution in the standing of a great many families, and opportunities for venality on the part of those going to Westminster. Successive ministries made every effort by bribes and jobs to determine the composition of the group of 16 representative Scottish peers, as well as to secure the allegiance of the bloc of Scottish MPs. In addition, the House of Lords became exercised about the possibility of needy and greedy Scots nobles cheerfully attaching themselves to the government of the day in return for elevation to British peerages and a welcome supply of cash.9

As for the Kirk, its fears concerning the Union arose from the prospect of rule by Parliaments that would be predominantly episcopal. The Treaty of Union itself said nothing about a religious establishment, but it was envisaged that the national church of Scotland would continue to be presbyterian. That the fears of the ministers were not unfounded about the effects of the Union was illustrated by the events of 1710-12. An episcopal minister named Greenshields defied the presbytery of Edinburgh and used the English liturgy for worship. The magistrates of the city imprisoned him, and their action was upheld by the Court of Session. An appeal to reverse this decision was successfully made to the House of Lords — the Greenshields case and that of the Earl of Roseberry (1708) establishing the appellate jurisdiction of the House of Lords with respect to civil causes in Scotland.10 The episcopalian took the bit between their teeth and caused to be passed a series of three acts in 1712 which affronted the presbyterians, or at least the popular party among them. The first act, innocent enough to modern eyes, was one to restore a Christmas recess to the Court of Session. Presbyterians viewed it as a step towards the revival of popery, and it was intended to insult them.

The second piece of legislation was the Toleration Act, which secured the right of episcopal congregations to worship using Anglican forms. In so doing, however, it introduced a bit of mischief into the ranks of the episcopalian, some of whom rejected Anglican worship and held by the Scottish Prayer Book of 1637. In addition, this act relaxed the Kirk's discipline from those who did not recognise the jurisdiction of the presbyterian courts, and so lessened the powers of the ministry. Finally, there was the Patronage Act, intended to reinforce the power of the lairds with respect to the nomination of ministers, but through poor drafting leaving congregations the right to dissent by majority vote from a call, and thus throw the resolution of an impasse into the hands of the presbytery. This act was undoubtedly a check to the popular party in the Kirk and certainly a reactionary measure, though Adam Smith's friends among the Moderate clergy benefitted from the patronage of landowners educated with them, and generally supporting their theological and social outlook. The patronage system itself had the seeds within it of the great cleavage in the Kirk of the nineteenth century.11

To be sure, Smith had no love for theocracy, and it may be that residual fears about the punitive arm of the Kirk prevented him from undertaking the responsibility of seeing to the publication of Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion after the latter's death.12

Apart from Jacobite plots to overthrow the Union by force, it is not surprising to find that by the end of 1712, with the Kirk alarmed, the nobles and gentry upset over the sharing of the immediate spoils of the Union, the merchants disgruntled about trading difficulties, and popular unrest prevalent, a move was made in Parliament to repeal the Union. Seafield, who had cynically pronounced at the final sitting of the Scottish Parliament, that this was 'the end o' an auld sang', itemized the grievances of the Scots with regard to the Union on 2 June 1713 in the House of Lords. The subsequent motion to repeal the Union was finally defeated by only four proxy votes. Yet, the economic currents were beginning to run in the direction of some Scotsmen, if not the country as a whole. As Smith noted in the Wealth of Nations, the cattle trade picked up and shortly afterwards the linen trade, which did not require much internal adjustment to meet the English market. In the long run, a banking system with ties to England was developed that could meet, to some extent, the chronic need in Scotland for capital to back agricultural improvement and emerging indus-
try.\textsuperscript{13}

Turning now to the political system bequeathed to Scotland as a result of the Union, it is a useful preliminary to present some background information about Smith. His father, also named Adam, was private secretary to Hugh Campbell, 3rd Earl of Loudoun, joint Secretary of State for Scotland 1704–8, and strong advocate of the Union. Smith's Snell Exhibition which took him to Oxford (1740–6) may well have been awarded on the basis of Campbell support. While at Oxford, Smith visited both the London residence and the Oxfordshire seat, Adderbury, of the 2nd Duke of Argyll, Red John of the Battles (d.1743), to whom Adam's cousin William Smith was secretary. It is not unlikely that Smith's election as Professor of Logic at Glasgow in 1751 was due, in part, to the backing of John's brother Archibald (3rd Duke, d.1761), by that time firmly in control of patronage in Scotland, including that of university chairs.\textsuperscript{14} In 1759, when a tutor was required for Duke John's grandson, Henry Campbell Scott, 3rd Duke of Buccleuch, Smith was a prime candidate, ostensibly because of the reputation of the Theory of Moral Sentiments, published that year, but no doubt once again because he was known to the Argyll family. Finally, in 1778, when Smith sought a place as a Commissioner of Customs for Scotland, Buccleuch successfully exerted his patronage. Further support probably came from Henry Dundas, the Lord Advocate, who had come into power, roughly from 1775, to fill the vacuum left by the death of the 3rd Duke of Argyll and the failure of Lord Bute, that Duke's nephew, to manage Scotland. The key to this operation, to the rule of the 3rd Duke of Argyll and that of Dundas as 'Harry the Ninth', was control of the Scottish electors.

The electoral system established by the Union provided for 30 MPs to come from 33 counties, 6 of the smaller ones being paired, and 15 MPs to come from 67 burgh constituencies, these being arranged in 14 districts, with Edinburgh alone being responsible for one member. The franchise for the countries was the one established by an act of 1681: to be able to vote, freeholders had to hold land from the Crown valued at either 40 shillings of old extent (an obsolete means of estimating the taxable capacity of landowners) or £400 Scots of the current valuation. Freeholders were required by statute to meet annually at their head court to maintain their electoral roll. No one could represent a Scottish county or vote in its election who was not an enrolled freeholder. The town councils controlled the burgh district elections, and inescapably municipal politics boiled over into the parliamentary sort. While the maintenance of legally-constituted electoral rolls was a sound procedure, and one not found in England until after 1832, the great evil in the electoral system was that the Court of Session was not given an effective review jurisdiction over electoral matters. In consequence, corruption flourished in the absence of strict legal controls. Contested elections were inquired into by the House of Commons, and cases were heard not so much on their merits as on their party or interest-bloc appeal. It has been calculated that in 1830, two years before the system Smith knew was scrapped, there were fewer than 4,000 voters in Scotland. Clearly, every vote was valuable, especially to the possessor, and when there were a number of contests, the purchase price of a qualifying 'superiority', i.e., qualifying freeholding that carried a vote, skyrocketed. Thus, in Midlothian, after the death of Dundas, there were contests in 1811, 1812, and 1818. A letter of the period, dated 19 December 1816, shows that one vote was purchased for a total of £1,560 by a naval captain desirous of promotion, and another vote in the same county bought that same year cost £1,660.\textsuperscript{15}

Adam Smith was an interested witness of this system, and to some extent a participant in it. As witness, he concluded one letter sent to Gilbert Elliot of Minto on 10 October 1759, dealing chiefly with an answer to objections to his moral theory, with the following piece of news about a local election:

Mr Crawfurd has lost the town of Air. Sir Adam Ferguson and Lord Loudoun have got the better of him there. Your friend Mr Muir of Caldwell is in some danger from Mr Cunningham of Craigneds. The head court of the Shire was held yesterday in which everything was carried for Mr Muir, and all the new votes, that were cast to oppose him, rejected. The decision of that affair will depend, I hear, on the Duke of Argyll.\textsuperscript{16}

Behind this report is the story of a crisis in the management system in mid-century Scottish politics. Hitherto, control had been firmly in the hands of the 3rd Duke of Argyll, to whom Gilbert Elliot owed his own parliamentary seat for Selkirkshire. However, the star of Argyll's nephew, Lord Bute, was rising, in view of his influence over the Prince of Wales and the imminence of George II's death. Elliot had been making overtures to Bute for support. Bute's chief agent in Scotland was William Mure of Caldwell, MP for Renfrew-
shire 1742-61. In 1759, Mure supported as candidate for the Ayr burghs, Patrick Crauford of Auchenames, thus opposing the wishes of the Duke of Argyll and the 4th Earl of Loudoun. In consequence, Mure was himself opposed in Renfrewshire by William Cunningham of Craigends, son of a former MP, supported by the Earl of Glencarn. At the Michaelmas head court — when the list of voters for Renfrewshire was established on the basis of property ownership, as described above — the roll stood as follows: 13 freeholders for Mure, 6 for Cunningham, and 7 neutral, waiting for Argyll's instructions. Mure wrote to Bute on 16 October: 'I had the good fortune to out-number my opponents by more than two to one, so we kept off the roll the whole of Glencarn's new creations and are preparing to stand a law suit in defence of our proceedings'. The mention of a law suit arises from the fact that in 1743 an act was passed (16 Geo. II) giving the Court of Session limited review jurisdiction on enrolements and consequent elections. In 1760, Argyll swung his votes behind Mure, then a place was found for him as a Baron of the Exchequer Court of Scotland, and Craufurd was forced on the country. In Ayr in 1759, Argyll had supported Sir Adam Ferguson, son of Lord Kilkerran, a judge of the Court of Session, but when Bute came to power in 1760, Argyll compromised with him and made efforts to get Ferguson to withdraw. The Ayr town council was angered by the Argyll-Bute deal and refused to replace Ferguson, but in 1761 the election for the Ayr burghs went, as Bute wished, to his supporter, Alexander Wedderburn.17

Such was the manner of the selection of Scottish representatives for the Parliaments of Smith's time, which disturbed him not a whit. A letter of his to Henry Dundas, written on 13 December 1775, reveals that he was well-versed in the niceties of the electoral politics of Fife and ready to support the candidature of a relative:

I had yesterday a very long conversation with the Solicitor General and Andrew Stuart (law agent for the Hamilton family) regarding the politics of fife-shire. I told them exactly what I had done in favour of my Cousin; and they told me as exactly what they had done in favour of their respective friends.... I am thoroughly convinced that (Col. Robert) Skeene is as good a man as any you could pitch upon. He has been one of the best Sons, Brothers and Unkles that I have ever known; and, I am thoroughly convinced, will be an equally faithful supporter of whoever supports him ...18

Reverting now to Alexander Wedderburn, the successful candidate for the Ayr burghs in 1761, we find that he came to Bute's attention because his sister married Sir Henry Erskine, who was Bute's favourite. Wedderburn was possibly a student of Smith's at Glasgow, and certainly a member of the same social and intellectual circle in Edinburgh. It appears, for example, that he was prime mover of the first Edinburgh Review of 1755-6, to which Smith contributed articles. He closed a brief career as an advocate by quarrelling in the Court of Session with the Lord President, then left for London in 1757 and was called to the English Bar. Though slow at first to make his mark in Parliament, he came to the fore as a debater within five years or so, and was backed by Robert Clive, the supreme Indian nabob, for whom he acted as legal adviser.19 Loyal to his friends such as Smith, Wedderburn was very much the clever lawyer on the make, and he achieved the distinction of being the first Scotsman to sit on the woolsack as Lord Chancellor. As Lord Loughborough, his name probably stank in the nostrils of the British Convention of Reformers, and he had the reputation of ratting on his political allies when this was expedient. His first government post was that of Solicitor-General, and when exercising it he was the principal examiner of Benjamin Franklin in 1774, regarding the unauthorized disclosure of letters from the Governor of Massachusetts which recommended that force be used against that colony. It is sometimes claimed that Wedderburn's diatribes so angered Franklin that he determined to throw in his lot with the party favouring American independence:

Sarcastic Sawney, swol'n with spite and prate
On silent Franklin poured his venal hate.
The calm philosopher, without reply,
Withdrew and gave his country liberty.20

Wedderburn corresponded with Smith about the problem of the American colonies, and on 6 June 1776 inclined to a hopeful view, whereas Smith was pessimistic about the outcome:

Your Reflections (ie, Smith's) a month ago upon the bad advice from America are all confuted by the favourable accounts lately received, which prove that our preparations have been seasonable, our Plans wise and the execution of them in all the departments of government active and vigorous. The next westerly wind may possibly reestablish
your doctrines, but in the meantime because Quebec is not taken and General Lee is, and because five American frigates were not able to beat an old twenty Gun Ship, we are wonderfully pleased with ourselves; I have neither despised very much nor been at all elated by any accounts from America, But I have a strong persuasion that in spite of all our wretched Conduct, the mere force of government clumsily and unsteadily applied will beat down the more unsteady and unmanageable Force of a democratical Rebellion. Fortune must be very adverse to us indeed, if distraction, folly, Envy and Faction should not fight for us as well as against us.21

As time went on, Wedderburn became disenchanted with North’s prosecution of the war, and he sought to gain advantages for himself from the Prime Minister’s difficulties. He also favoured the policy of reconciliation and had a hand in the initiatives in that direction of 1776 and 1778.

Among his papers in the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, there is a document endorsed in his writing: ‘Smiths Thoughts on the State of the Contest with America, February 1778’.22 There is good reason for thinking that following the surrender of Burgoyne at Saratoga in October 1777, when the British government felt the need to consult experts about the American situation, Wedderburn called on Smith to draft a memorandum. Smith was well qualified to comply. During his days as a professor at Glasgow, he had known merchants who were extensively involved in the American trade, taking advantage of the opportunity brought by the Union to be protected by the Navigation Acts. Subsequently, he had worked in 1766–7 with Charles Townshend on the budget that vitally affected the relationship between the mother country and the American colonies by insisting on both the right and the practice of imposing import duties, including the famous one on tea at 3d per lb.23 At the same period, Smith had been consulted by Lord Shelburne, then a Secretary of State, about the history of colonies.24 Also, during the last stages of the composition of the Wealth of Nations and at the time of its publication, he was much preoccupied with America. His friend David Hume wrote to him on 8 February 1776 that he had heard Smith was ‘very zealous in American Affairs’.25 The two parts of the Wealth of Nations dealing with the American crisis and similar problems in Ireland, Book IV, Ch. vii, ‘Of Colonies’, and Book V, Ch. iii, ‘Of publick Debts’, commanded respect and added to Smith’s contemporary reputation. This is best illustrated by the Letter from Governor Pownall (1776), which challenged some of Smith’s views about America. It was written by a true expert on America — Thomas Pownall had spent five years altogether in the colonies, serving as secretary to the governor of New York, lieutenant-governor of New Jersey, and governor of Massachusetts Bay. As an MP, his was the one voice raised in Parliament against the folly of Townshend’s attempt in the budget of 1767 to raise an American revenue.26

As for the memorandum, the doctrines expressed in it are similar to those of the Wealth of Nations. Only the thesis concerning the cost to the mother country of a monopoly trade is scanted, possibly because the stress in the memorandum is on political considerations. The other chief topics are there. The wars connected with America have been extremely costly, and a military solution to the present problem will cost even more. Taxation would be acceptable to the Americans if their representatives entered into the discussion of the measures. There would be difficulties attached to contested elections if there were a system of representation, arising from the distance between America and the Parliament at Westminster, but disputes could be handled by local courts with the appropriate review jurisdiction. (Smith may have had in mind here the lesson drawn from Scottish experience with election difficulties, eg, in the notorious Anstruther burghs cases of 1765–8.)27 However, the present frame of mind of the Americans is not conducive to submission to Britain, and the ambition of their militant leaders certainly rejects submission. The memorandum includes two curiosities of thought which are fully worthy of the ingenuity of Smith. One is the proposal that to secure the independent Americans as allies of Britain, Canada should be restored to the French and the Floridas to Spain. Something like this suggestion, which smacks of Realpolitik, had occurred to Samuel Johnson in 1775: ‘one wild proposal is best answered by another. Let us restore to the French what we have taken from them. We shall see the colonialists at our feet, when they have an enemy so near them’ (Taxation No Tyranny). The second curious proposal is that ostensibly the old colonial relationship of 1763 should be restored. Secretly, however, the American and British leaders would agree to sever gradually the link between the two countries. With some reason, the memorandum concludes that a scheme of such finesse would probably fail in the execution. A modern student of diplomacy has observed, of course, that ‘scholars and lit-
erary men often seem more given to the invented idealism of Realpolitik than working diplomats'.

The memorandum argues that the scheme offering the most advantages to the British empire is that of a constitutional union with American representation. The Union of Scotland and England of 1707 is adduced as a model for this. However, it is alleged that in the American context the scheme has scarce a single advocate except for 'a solitary philosopher' like the writer of the memorandum. Smith had indeed mentioned the idea some twelve times in the Wealth of Nations, but he was not unique in espousing it. Franklin had propounded it in the form of the 'Albany Plan' of 1751, and had written in 1754 that union would be 'very acceptable to the colonies', with certain reservations. As late as 1775, he had a lingering sympathy for the idea, but in the end he attached himself to the view that nothing would serve but complete emancipation. Lord Kames, Smith's former patron, had suggested a 'consolidating union' in his Sketches of the History of Man (II. iv; 1774), and that same year the First Continental Congress in America had debated and defeated with only a narrow margin Joseph Galloway's plan for a 'grand legislative union'. Its chief proponent, however, was probably Governor Pownall, who had recommended a federal union as an answer to the American problem in successive editions of his book, The Administration of the Colonies (1764, 1765, 1766, 1768, 1774, 1777). Pownall, from his first-hand experience, understood the gravity of the American situation, and on 2 December 1777, before the news of Saratoga reached Britain, he told the House of Commons: 'Until you shall be convinced that you are no longer sovereigns over America, but that the United States are an independent sovereign people — until you are prepared to treat them as such — it is of little consequence at all, what schemes or plans of conciliation this side the House or that may adopt'.

Yet, if the case for constitutional union had no chance of acceptance in connexion with America, something would be added by Smith's memorandum to the quantum of opinion in government circles concerning the appropriate way to deal with a colony inclined to rebellion. In 1800 that opinion triumphed in the establishment of a parliamentary union with Ireland, when the free trade argument won the support of the Irish commercial interest for this measure. Wedderburn, still in office at this date, but by that time Lord Chancellor Loughborough, sought to prejudice George III against the expected outcome of the Irish union in the form of

Catholic emancipation. That the measure was carried forward at all was due to another 'scholar' of Smith's, the younger Pitt. He demonstrated by his budgets and taxation proposals that he carried the doctrines of the Wealth of Nations in his head, if not the Thoughts on the Contest with America, which usefully supplemented them.

It will be recalled that as Smith moves to the conclusion of the Wealth of Nations, he argues that it is not contrary to justice that both Ireland and America should contribute to the discharge of Britain's public debt. This had been contracted to support the government established by the Revolution of 1689, to which the Protestants owed not only their authority in Ireland, but also their security for liberty, property, and religion. Similarly, the American colonies owed their enjoyment of liberty, security, and property to that same government. Smith continues by pointing out that for Ireland, union with Britain would bring advantages offsetting the burden of additional taxation. He notes that for Scotland, union with England brought complete deliverance for the 'middling and inferior ranks' from the 'power of an aristocracy which had always before oppressed them'. Through union with Britain, the Irish of all ranks would be freed from a much more oppressive aristocracy:

an aristocracy not founded, like that of Scotland, in the nature and respectable distinctions of birth and fortune; but in the most odious of all distinctions, those of political and religious prejudices; distinctions which, more than any other, animate both the insolence of the oppressors and the hatred and indignation of the oppressed, and which commonly render the inhabitants of the same country more hostile to one another than those of different countries ever are.

On the basis of his insight into the nature of the deep division in Irish society, Smith concluded that without a union with Britain, the inhabitants of Ireland would not consider themselves one people for many ages.

Before that union came in 1800, however, events pushed the Irish into demands for free trade in 1778-9, in part to meet the economic crisis exacerbated by the American war. Once again Smith was called upon by the government for an expert opinion. Two approaches were made to him. One by William Eden, Secretary of the Board of Trade, and a political ally of Wedderburn's, was for-
warded to Smith by Henry Dundas on 30 October 1779. In his comfortable way, Dundas expressed himself as not averse to the idea of free trade, but he thought there would need to be some protection against the Irish underselling the British through the cheapness of their labour. Dundas, very likely with the Union of 1707 in mind, suggested that a union with Ireland would be the best solution if it could be accomplished. 'If not', he wrote, 'the Irish Parliament must be managed by a proper distribution of the Loaves and fishes, so that the Legislatures of the two Countries may act in union together'.

Smith, replying on 1 November, noted that there was some uncertainty about what the Irish demands really were:

They may mean to demand a free trade to Great Britain, their manufactures and produce when imported into this country being subjected to no other duties than the like manufactures and produce of our own. Nothing, in my opinion, would be more highly advantageous to both countries than this mutual freedom of trade. It would help to break down that absurd monopoly which we have most absurdly established against ourselves in favour of almost all the different classes of our manufacturers.

Whatever the Irish mean to demand in this way, in the present situation of our affairs, I should think it madness not to grant it. Whatever they may demand our manufacturers, unless the leading and principal men among them are properly dealt with beforehand, probably oppose it. That they may be so dealt with, I know from experience, and that it may be done at little expense and with no great trouble. I could even point out some persons, who, I think, are fit and likely to deal with them successfully for this purpose.

In a parallel letter written on 8 November to Lord Carlisle, President of the Board of Trade, Smith adds the thought that it will be a long time before Ireland is an effective competitor with England. He mentions the lack of coal and wood, continuing:

(Ireland) wants order, police, and a regular administration of justice both to protect and to restrain the inferior ranks of people, articles more essential to the progress of Industry than both coal and wood put together, and which Ireland must continue to want as long as it continues to be divided

Prescient words, we may think, in view of the present and apparently endemic violence in Ulster!

What lessons are we to learn, then, from this brief review of some leading political themes in the correspondence of Adam Smith? There are some hints as to the matrix of his outlook on politics: the system established by the Union of 1707 and the managers of Scotland, such as the 3rd Duke of Argyll and Henry Dundas; some insights into his cool-headed assessment of the folly of those of his contemporaries so bemused by the golden dream of empire, that they could not see that the Americans had come of age; coupled with some amazement at his confidence that he could assist Dundas to grease the palm of the Hidden Hand, and so promote the great aim of free trade, at least in the case of Ireland. Some will see in the letters, as in the doctrines of the Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith the rationalizer of the rapacity of the capitalist and entrepreneur. Critics of this persuasion will argue that Smith’s call for ‘liberty and freedom’ was really an incitement for the rich to rob the poor with impunity. But this, surely, is a travesty of what Smith stands for, and what the Scotland of his day taught him. And here we must turn to the record of his published views. He did not love a lord, either the aristocratic sort or the capitalist: ‘All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind’. He did not love ‘that insidious and crafty animal, vulgarly a statesman or politician, whose councils are directed by the momentary fluctuations of affairs’. And he did not love dealers, ‘in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, ... whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it’. What he sought to do was to understand and describe the behaviour of such groups in the real world, together with the other ‘orders’, whose interdependence constituted society, in the interest of all members of society enhancing the quality of their lives to the degree that circumstances permitted. Before Marx, he knew that alienation for the working classes was the price of the dynamism of an industrial age, and before Lenin he knew the cost of imperialism: ‘Commerce, which ought naturally to be, among nations, as among individuals, a
bond of union and friendship, has become the most fertile source of discord and animosity'. A better moralist than either, he argued in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that a society 'flourishes and is happy' when it operates not by the negative rule of justice, but by the positive rule of beneficence. It is also true that Smith's 'scholars' Dundas and Loughborough and Pitt forgot this part of his teaching in their fear and alarm over the French Revolution, and Lord Braxfield who tried the leading radicals of the British Convention of Reformers probably had no time for it at any point. In their stand for political reform, however, radicals such as Thomas Muir and William Skivring sought the better life for society advocated by Smith the moralist. But to them and other like-minded political reformers and innovators, Smith, whom his correspondence reveals to have been the friend and admirer of Edmund Burke, addressed these cautionary words:

even a wise man may be disposed to think some alteration necessary in that constitution or form of government, which, in its actual condition, appears plainly unable to maintain the public tranquillity. In such cases, however, it often requires, perhaps, the highest effort of political wisdom to determine when a real patriot ought to support and endeavour to re-establish the authority of the old system, and when he ought to give way to the more daring, but often dangerous spirit of innovation.

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1 This paper arises from work done with Professor Ernest C. Mossner preparing an edition of the correspondence of Adam Smith, which will be published by the Clarendon Press. An earlier draft was read to the Conference on Scottish Studies, at the annual meeting held 4 June 1975 at the University of Alberta. This version has benefitted from study of Andrew Skinner's paper, 'Adam Smith and the American Economic Community' (T/S 1-30), presented to the IVth Congress on the Enlightenment (S25), held at Yale University, on 17 July 1975. Mr Skinner's essay will appear in *The Journal of the History of Ideas* in January 1976.

2 The second paper given at the 1975 meeting of the Conference on Scottish Studies was 'The British Convention of Reformers at Edinburgh, 1793, and the American Revolution', by Professor Arthur Sheps, University of Toronto.


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sent writer has had the benefit of studying a commentary and notes on ‘Smith’s Thoughts’ prepared by Professor Davis Stevens, Whitman College, for the forthcoming edition of the correspondence of Smith (Appendix B.).


23 Letter from Smith to Shelburne, 12 Feb. 1767: MS. Marquess of Lansdowne, Bowood Library; Rae, pp.235-6.


25 HPHC iii. 316; Fay, p.107.

26 HPHC i. 499-500.


30 HPHC iii. 318; when John Sinclair of Ulbster brought Smith the news of Burgoyne’s surrender at Saratoga and anguished that the nation was ruined, Smith replied cooly: ‘There is a great deal of ruin in a nation’ (Rae, p.343.).

31 There is an anecdote that when Smith was in London in 1787 and entered Dundas’s house on Wimbledon Common, the assembled company — including Pitt, Dundas, Addington, Wilberforce, and Grenville — rose from their seats to receive him. ‘Be seated, gentlemen,’ said Smith. ‘No,’ replied Pitt, ‘we will stand till you are first seated, for we are all your scholars’’ (Rae, p.405.).

32 WN ii. 483 (V. iii).

33 MS. Auckland Papers; Rae, p.353.

34 Scottish Record Office, MS. GD51/11/355; Rae, p.355.

35 Harvard University, MS. Kress Library; Rae, p.351.

36 WN i. 437 (III. iv).

37 WN i. 490 (IV. ii).

38 WN i. 278 (I. xi).

39 This glance at Smith’s moral thought is based on Andrew Skinner’s useful intro. to The Wealth of Nations Books I-III (Penguin Classics: Harmondsworth, 1970); The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1790), II. iii. 3; WN i. 519 (IV. iii. b); V. I. Lenin, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (Foreign Languages Press: Peking, 1970). Marx was stimulated to think about alienation within the economic context by his study of the classical economists in Paris 1843-4, expressing his ideas in the ‘Economic and Philosophical MSS’, which formed the basis for Capital (1867); see David McLellan, Karl Marx: His Life and Thought (Macmillan paperback: London, 1973), pp.107-12.

Marx believed that Adam Ferguson was Smith’s ‘teacher’ in connection with the concept of the division of labour; see Capital (Foreign Languages Publishing House: Moscow, n.d.), i. 123, n. 1. He was noting the priority in time of Ferguson’s Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767) over the Wealth of Nations, (1776) unaware that Smith had been teaching ideas about the division of labour at Glasgow from the 1750s.

41 For a modern account of the leaders of the British Convention of Reformers at Edinburgh and Braxfield’s conduct on the bench when trying some of them, see E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Pelican paperback: Harmondsworth, 1968), pp.135-41. Professor Sheps argues persuasively that Thomp-