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REVIEWS

Life of Adam Smith. By JOHN RAE. (London : Macmillan and Co. 1895.)

IT is a singular circumstance that a century should have passed since the appearance of the *Wealth of Nations* without seeing the production of a life of its great author of more than meagre dimensions. Indeed, as Mr. Rae points out in his Preface, no considerable additions have been made by later biographers to the brief, though suggestive, memoir first written by Dugald Stewart in 1793, and published, with illustrative notes, in 1810. The reason for this—perhaps the most notable—omission in biographical literature, is not to be found in any decline in the fame of Adam Smith himself, or in the influence exerted by his speculations alike on the development of thought and the conduct of affairs. It would be difficult to mention any philosophical treatise which has produced more important or permanent results in practice ; and, as the years have gone by, its power has grown greater rather than less. Nor has time robbed the book of its unique pre-eminence in economic writing, and every fresh generation of English students turns again to its pages, only to be again surprised at their freshness and fulness. The immortality of the book—a rare quality in general, and still more in specially economic, literature—has preserved the memory of the author with such vitality that we are sometimes tempted to forget that it was written, and that he died, more than a century ago. In the interval, however, as Mr. Rae observes, ‘many particulars about Adam Smith and a number of his letters have incidentally and by very scattered channels found their way into print ;’ and within the last few years a valuable and interesting addition to bibliography has been made in the shape of a catalogue of his library, edited by Mr. Bonar.

The time, therefore, was opportune for the production of a biography which would include the new material, and be executed on a scale commensurate to the importance of its subject ; and, if Mr. Rae will allow us to say so, with the hour has come the man. The vigilance with which every illustrative piece of information has been gathered from every likely quarter, is not more remarkable than the skill with which it has been pieced together into a connected narra-

tive. The material even now is somewhat scanty, for the life of Adam Smith was after all not very eventful; but Mr. Rae has enabled us to call up a picture of the exact surroundings in which he moved, of the particular individuals and circumstances with which he came into contact, and to reproduce in our imaginations an adequate representation of the most interesting and prominent figure in the history of economic thought. Under his skilful guidance we follow Adam Smith from Kirkcaldy to Glasgow and Oxford, and we note how he was influenced as he passed from boyhood to manhood. We trace the growth of his early reputation as Lecturer and Professor, and then as Moral Philosopher. We observe him moving in mercantile circles at Glasgow, and in literary and philosophical society at Glasgow and Edinburgh, while the ideas, which were afterwards to take formal shape, were germinating in his mind. We follow him on his foreign travels and watch him in his intercourse with French *Économistes* and *littérateurs*. We see him settled at Kirkcaldy engaged on his great work, and we note the repute which it won immediately, and the subsequent fame and success which attended its author. The careful reader of the *Wealth of Nations* will not fail to detect in scattered passages of that book certain autobiographical hints, and will be able to construct from its pages some conception of the disposition and character of its author. But Mr. Rae has filled in the outlines, and produced a more complete portrait; and the samples of correspondence, which he has supplied, add touches, so to say, from the hands of Adam Smith himself. The delicate and penetrating irony, which is continually appearing in some shrewd reflection on the conduct and motives of men, the ardent and persistent zeal with which some project of beneficial reform is pursued, the affectionate warmth which is lavished on objects of approval, are evident to him who reads between the lines of the *Wealth of Nations*; but the impression will certainly be deepened by the perusal of Mr. Rae's biography.

On two important points he has vindicated the reputation of Adam Smith from charges brought against it. Stories of his absent-mindedness are not uncommon, and one of the most remarkable proofs of Mr. Rae's diligence is to be found in the manifest pains taken to ascertain the probable truth or falsehood of tales like these, which have been accepted without any careful examination of the character of the evidence on which they are based. Of the existence of this defect of absent-mindedness little doubt can be entertained; but the inference sometimes drawn, that Adam Smith was an abstract philosopher, with little taste and less capacity for practical affairs, if it could stand the test of acquaintance with the evident interest in matters of practice shown on most of the pages of the *Wealth of Nations*, and the indications of a practical instinct betrayed in many a shrewd remark, is certainly shaken by facts recorded in Mr. Rae's *Life*. The large share spontaneously given to Adam Smith in the practical administration of the business of the University of Glasgow, his selection as the suitable

travelling tutor for the young Duke of Buccleuch by so thorough a man of the world as Townshend, and the success with which he discharged this important mission, certainly do not point to any great lack of practical capacity.

The other particular, in which Mr. Rae vindicates the fame of Adam Smith from charges brought against it, is of greater significance. Now and again whispers have been raised in economic circles of suspicions of plagiarism, or at least of a want of proper acknowledgment of sources of information. These charges have been partly, no doubt, a reaction from the once established tradition that Economics began with Adam Smith. That tradition has given way before historical research, and Adam Smith himself might have partly furnished the means for its refutation in the praise which he bestowed on Quesnay and the French Physiocrats. But we have always felt that these charges deserved to be mentioned only in stealthy whispers and with bated breath, and that the patent merits of Adam Smith should have sufficed to preserve him from injury. Mr. Rae, however, adduces some important considerations which bear on the matter. The early influence of Hutcheson, whose pupil Adam Smith was, the anticipations of his own later views, which are to be found in lectures given by him at Glasgow before Quesnay had published at all, the shape which the *Wealth of Nations* had already taken in his own mind before he discussed his scheme of doctrine with his Paris friends, are significant points to which Mr. Rae accords a just emphasis; and, in answer to the statement that Adam Smith borrowed from Turgot, he argues that it is at least as likely that he gave to Turgot as that Turgot gave to him. Charges of plagiarism indeed are easy to make and difficult to refute; for the same subject may present itself in a similar guise to independent minds, and it is proverbially hard to prove a negative. The one circumstance suggests the charge, the other shows that it is not easy to rebut.

In these two respects at least Mr. Rae has contributed new information, and he has presented the old in a fresh and attractive form. He has thereby rendered a great service to Economics, for which he will find ample reward in the pious gratitude of generations of students who preserve an affection for Adam Smith, which has survived assaults in the past, and will, we are confident, surmount attacks in the future. He has spared neither time nor skill in rendering justice to the memory of the most memorable name in economic literature, and by doing so he has removed a standing reproach and supplied a notable omission.

L. L. PRICE