



## **Hume to Smith: An Unpublished Letter**

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*Hume Studies* Volume XII, Number 2 (November, 1986) 201 -209.

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## HUME TO SMITH: AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER\*

In all probability, a newly-discovered letter by David Hume, written on 17 November 1772 and published here for the first time, was addressed to Adam Smith. Purchased in May 1982 by Kwansai Gakuin University Library, it now forms part of the Adam Smith Collection there. The vendors stated the letter was acquired from a French collector, but there seems to be no other information available about its provenance.<sup>1</sup>

The letter itself is a brief one in which Hume urges the addressee to move to an excellent house in the New Town of Edinburgh which will be empty next Whitsuntide, one of the Scottish quarter-days or term-days, fixed for the beginning and end of tenancy and usually falling on 15 May. There is a postscript, in which Hume adds that he is enclosing an account of the importing of money into Spain that was once requested from him. This enclosure has not been traced.

There is no doubt about the authenticity of the Hume letter, but there is a technical difficulty about the identity of the addressee. This is made known by a slip pasted on the foot of the letter. A suspicious mind might think of an owner doing this to enhance the value of the letter, but the words 'Adam Smith Esqr Kirkaldy' are probably in Hume's hand, and the slip may well have been cut from the cover of the letter.

The contents of the letter, to be sure, point definitely to Adam Smith as the recipient. For one thing, Hume stresses that the house he has in mind for his correspondent 'has a Prospect of ... even I believe Kirkaldy,' and Smith was certainly the most prominent of Hume's intimate friends then living in

the 'lang toun' visible across the Firth of Forth from many parts of Edinburgh. There were others associated with Kirkcaldy, of course, such as James Oswald of Dunnikier, also Smith's childhood friend and someone with a great interest in political economy, but he had died in 1769. One might think, too, of the brothers Adam, in particular Robert and John, rising architects and later designers of Hume's memorial on Carlton Hill, but the focus of their life was London by this date, and they were unlikely to be asking Hume for an account of the money imported into Spain.

In Hume's later years, he delighted in conversing with his friends in his home, and would call on them to pass time with him, even to move to Edinburgh to be near him. For example, he wrote to Smith on 23 November 1772 (corr. 134) that Adam Ferguson 'comes over next week, to a house in this neighbourhood. Pray, come over this winter, and join us.' On other occasions, too, he urged Smith to come to Edinburgh to visit him or to settle there so that they could enjoy each other's company.

Thus, the first point suggesting that the new letter must be addressed to Smith arises from awareness of the relationship between Hume and Smith at this period. As is well known, Smith left the service of the Duke of Buccleuch in 1767 and returned from London to Kirkcaldy. There he lived with his mother and immersed himself in writing the Wealth of Nations until he left for London in May 1773 to see to the publication of his great book. As John Rae wrote of the intervening years: 'Hume, who thought the country an unsuitable place for a man of letters, used every endeavour to persuade [Smith] to remove to Edinburgh, but without success.'<sup>2</sup>

In a letter from James's Court of the Old Town, dated 20 August 1769 (Corr. 121), Hume asked Smith with all sincerity, but with a pleasing sense of humour, to spend some time with him:

I am glad to have come within sight of you, and to have a View of Kirkaldy from my Windows: But as I wish also to be within speaking terms of you, I wish we could concert measures for that purpose. I am mortally sick at Sea, and regard with horror, and a kind of hydrophobia the great Gulph that lies between us. I am also tir'd of travelling, as much as you ought naturally to be, of staying at home: I therefore propose to you to come hither, and pass some days with me in this Solitude. I want to know what you have been doing, and propose to exact a rigorous Account of the method, in which you have employed yourself during your Retreat. I am positive you are in the wrong in many of your Speculations, especially where you have the Misfortune to differ from me. All these are Reasons for our meeting, and I wish you would make me some reasonable Proposal for the Purpose. There is no Habitation on the Island of Inchkeith; otherwise I should challenge you to meet me on that Spot, and neither [of] us ever to leave the Place, till we were fully agreed on all points of Controversy.

Also, in a letter of 28 January 1772 (Corr. 129), Hume greatly regretted that he could not have Smith with him at the Christmas season, because of his sister's illness, but he made it clear that he had expected Smith to stay at his home. In the same letter, Hume complained of Smith's 'Indolence and Love of Solitude' which he thought deprived him of his friend's company.

Taking these letters into account, we may discern that in the new letter Hume was taking up a familiar theme, urging Smith to make a resolution to

move to the New Town, to a house of which he had first-hand knowledge because his brother John lived in the same tenement or 'Land.' It can be conjectured that Smith replied by rejecting this scheme, and Hume's response to this must be his letter of 23 November (Corr. 134).

I shou'd agree to your Reasoning, if I could trust your Resolution. Come hither for some weeks about Christmas; dissipate yourself a little; return to Kirkaldy; finish your Work before Autumn; go to London; print it; return and settle in this Town, which suits your studious, independent turn even better than London: Execute this plan faithfully; and I forgive you.

R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner have argued that the 'Reasoning' of the first sentence of this quotation is that Smith cannot pass some time with Hume because, as a plan he had received from Smith indicated, the completion of the Wealth of Nations was imminent.<sup>3</sup> However, if we take the new letter of 17 November into account, and regard Hume's letter of 23 November as a response to a missing, intervening letter from Smith, we can interpret Smith's 'Reasoning' as bearing directly on the rejection of a scheme calling for a move to the 'excellent House' in the New Town. Hume affects to agree to Smith's 'Reasoning' provided his friend's firmness of mind could be trusted, and he outlines a plan of action that would result in a Christmas visit from Smith, his return to Kirkaldy to complete the Wealth of Nations, to move to London in connexion with printing it, and then settlement in Edinburgh, where the two friends could enjoy each other's company. Smith actually followed something like this plan. Regarding his health as precarious, he asked Hume to be his literary executor in a letter dated 16 April

1773 (Corr. 137), and he set off for London in May - well before the Autumn of Hume's projection. Sad to say, it was Hume's health that gave out, and though he lived to read the Wealth of Nations and affirm its greatness (Corr. 150), he died in 1776, with Smith back in Kirkcaldy, and the dream of neighbourly companionship in Edinburgh never accomplished.

Thus, the new letter is useful in a biographical sense, and helps us to appreciate the nature of the friendship between Hume and Smith, providing more evidence of the older man's warm interest in the younger one's welfare, and perhaps suggesting the latter's reserve arising from involvement in the composition of the Wealth of Nations at this period.

From the viewpoint of economics, of course, the postscript is even more interesting than the letter. Smith's correspondence reveals that he sought help of various kinds from friends and acquaintances, and 'an account of the Money imported into Spain' would help him considerably. In the Wealth of Nations, he wrote the 'whole gold and silver annually importēd into both Spain and Portugal, according to the best accounts, does not commonly much exceed six millions sterling' (IV.i.28). Also, in the 'Digression concerning the Variations in the Value of Silver during the Course of the Four Last Centuries,' he assessed it as 'about six millions sterling a year,' according to the reports of 'Mr Meggens' and G.T.F. Raynal (I.xi,g.31-35).

Now, Hume's reference in the postscript of the new letter to 'an Account I had given' of the importation of money into Spain 'I know not where' is puzzling. Perhaps we can assume he forgot stating

his view of the matter in his essay, 'Of Money,' which forms part of the Political Discourses:

The Spaniards and Portuguese from their mines, the English, French, and Dutch, by their African trade, and by their interlopers in the West Indies, bring<sup>4</sup> home about six millions a year.

We can then interpret the postscript as follows. Smith had asked Hume for an account of the gold and silver imported into Spain. Hume looked for relevant reference material, and found the 'Scrawl' enclosed with his letter. The 'Scrawl' was given to him by 'Count Zinzendorf,' and Hume validates it by noting it 'concurd very exactly' with his own account in 'Of Money,' whose location he cannot precisely remember. Thus, when Smith wrote that 'several other very well authenticated, though manuscript, accounts, I have been assured, agree, in making this whole importation amount at an average to about six million sterling, sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less' (WN I.xi.g.34), the 'Scrawl' sent by Hume might very well have been in his mind.

It remains to identify the contributor of the 'Scrawl' mentioned in the postscript. This must surely be Ludwig Friedrich Julius, Count von Zinzendorf (1721-80), an expert on finance and commerce, who had studied law at Leipzig and then became a civil servant in Vienna.<sup>5</sup> When he was an Austrian attaché at Versailles in 1750, he developed an interest in French and English financial and credit systems and wrote an essay on the founding of a state bank. Hume may have met him in April 1748 during his stay in Vienna as a diplomat with General St Clair, or in 1753 when Count Zinzendorf visited Britain. His fame as the author of the Political Discourses would bring him to the attention of the

Count, who would be a useful source of information about economic affairs in Europe. It may be pertinent to note that whereas the first and second editions (1752) of the Political Discourses estimate the importation of gold and silver at 'about seven millions a year,' this figure is revised to 'six millions' in the third edition of 1754. Neither Hume nor Smith specifically mention Count Zinzendorf as one of their sources, but it is intriguing to think that this newly-discovered letter has put us on the track of the network of communication between Smith and Hume and a European acquaintance which helped to give the Wealth of Nations its impressive range of scholarly reference and practical authority.

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Letter to Adam Smith

Ms., Adam Smith Collection, No. 80, Kwansei Gakuin University, Nishinomiya, Hyogo, Japan.

St Andrews Square, 17 of Novr 1772

Dear Sir

I have heard of an excellent House for you which will probably be empty next Whitsuntide. It consists of five chearful Rooms, three of a good Size: It is the first Story of that Land<sup>6</sup> at the Play-house<sup>7</sup> in which my Brother<sup>8</sup> lives. It looks along Princes Street; has a Prospect of the Castle and Castlehill, and all Fields to the West; of the Calton hill, the Sea, Arthur's Seat, and even I

believe Kirkaldy to the East: Its rent is 35 pound:  
Shall I bespeak it for you? Have you Resolution  
enough to determine Yourself for your good?

Yours

David Hume

P.S.

You once askd me for an account of the Money imported  
into Spain: I send you the enclosed Scrawl, which is  
all I can find about it! But I found at the same  
time it concurd very exactly with an Account I had  
given of it, I know not where. It was Count  
Zinzendorf gave me this Account!

Adam Smith Esqr Kirkaldy<sup>9</sup>

- This is a revised English version of a paper originally published in Japanese in The Journal of Economics of Dwansei Gakuin University, Vol. 39, no. 4, January 1986.
- 1. The letter was purchased from Messrs Sotheby Parke Bernet & Co., auctioneers of literary property and works in London, who acquired it from a French collector. I am grateful to Professors Andrew S. Skinner (Glasgow University) and Ian S. Ross (University of British Columbia) for advice and suggestions concerning the letter. Especially I am indebted to Professor Ross for his advice to revise the earlier drafts of the present paper. It will be included in the second edition of The Correspondence of Adam Smith, prepared by E.C. Mossner and I.S. Ross for the Clarendon Press, Oxford (1st edn. 1977). Citations of Hume - Smith letters are from the 1st ed. of this book, and follow the reference system of the Glasgow Edition of the Works of Adam Smith, as do citations from the Wealth of Nations.
- 2. John Rae, Life of Adam Smith, 1895 (Augustus M. Kelley reprint: New York, 1965), p. 239.

3. R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner, Adam Smith (Croom Helm: London and Canberra, 1982), p. 150.
4. David Hume, Political Discourses, 3rd edn. (London, 1754), p. 49.
5. See the articles on him by F. von Krones in v. 45 of the Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie (Verlag von Duncker & Humblot: Leipzig, 1900).
6. Scots for a tenement building.
7. The old Theatre Royal built in 1768.
8. Hume's elder brother, John Home of Ninewells (1709-86). He moved to Edinburgh from his country estate in October 1767 for the sake of his children's education. After living first at James's Court in the Old Town, he moved to Butters Land in the New Town, near Hume's house in St David's Street, off St Andrew's Square.
9. Pasted-on slip.