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Why Smith ‘Retired’

It is easy to miss the fact that by 1777 Smith had ‘retired’ from active research and serious academic work. In 1780 Smith explained his retirement in a letter:

Upon my return to Britain [1766] I retired to a small Town in Scotland the place of my nativity, where I continued to live for six years in great tranquillity, and almost complete retirement. ... In the Spring of 1773 a proposal, which many of my friends thought very advantageous was made to me to go abroad a second time. The discussion of this proposal obliged me to go to London ... For four years after this London was my principal residence, where I finished and published my Book. I had returned to my old retirement at Kirkcaldy ... when by the interest of the Duke of Buccleugh, I was appointed to my present Office; which though it requires a good deal of attendance is both easy and honourable.1

If Smith had gone abroad in 1773 he might not have finished Wealth of Nations! As it was he took the post as Commissioner of Customs in Edinburgh in 1778, effectively retired, and did not finish Jurisprudence.

The reasons for his failure to publish his long promised work on Jurisprudence have been the subject of speculation. It had nothing to do with his ‘indolence’ or his being ‘too busy’ with his duties as a Commissioner of Customs in Edinburgh. It had everything to do with the political and personal embarrassment at the success of the American War of Independence. Smith lived in a Constitutional Monarchy. He was a much-respected authority on political economy and he had the ear of King’s Ministers in British Governments. That ought to have been a clue to why he went silent for 14 years until his death.

Cast your mind back to Smith’s 1763–4 lectures on constitutional monarchy and the six characteristics of the democratic foundations of British democracy (Chapter 15). Now note how these principles were among those incorporated into the Constitution of the United States. They were not
born of the accretion of centuries of constitutional development within a changing British monarchy; they were carried into effect by force of arms against the same British monarchy, long lauded by Smith for its democratic credentials and for its anticipated demise into impotent symbolism. The North Americans leapt from being British colonies governed by the King’s representatives into a full-blown new sovereign state, more advanced in democratic principles and their application than the motherland.

Smith cast the likely tensions, should there be a parliamentary alliance between the mother country and her colonies (the solution to the war that he preferred), as arising from a union between ‘the monarchical and democratic parts of the constitution.’ He conceded that ‘difficulties and great difficulties might occur in its execution’ but stated firmly that none of them were ‘insurmountable’ and, significantly for where the real problem might lay, he alludes not to the ‘nature of things’ in such a union, but from the ‘prejudices and opinions of the people on this and the other side of the Atlantic’. In other words, the real problem lay in the politics and personalities of the respective elites in Britain and its colonies, particularly within the British monarchy for which the idea of letting a democracy into a union of parliaments was anathema, especially one that would ‘take over’ the government of both parts of the union within a hundred years and ‘remove’ the ‘seat of the empire’, from London to a place like New York.

It is not difficult to see Smith’s problem. How could he publish Jurisprudence and not cause great offence to the King and the King’s Ministers? To endorse the colonists’ version of the six democratic principles in the US Constitution would give succour to the victorious enemies of the King; to decry the US Constitution would deny everything he had lectured and written about the democratic credentials of British liberty. How would he explain his proposal for a union of monarchy and democracy following the defeat of the King’s army and navy: with relief or regret? What form would a comparison of the two constitutions take: friendly or hostile?

Jurisprudence could not ignore the US Constitution, and Smith had no honourable way to obfuscate the issues. His sympathies for the application and development of the six principles of constitutional liberty as expressed by the American ex-colonists are apparent in Wealth of Nations and in his related correspondence on the American War. There would also be abundant reports on his many private conversations in his social hours on the conduct and fortunes of the War and its post-war evolution.

By the time of the French King’s execution, followed by the excesses of the Terror in 1793–4, an elaboration on his democratic six principles in a recently published Jurisprudence would have been too provocative for the safety of his friends’ and for his own posthumous reputation. As it was, after his death, some of his social conversations appeared to have been noted by the authorities in their interviews in 1793–4 with his friends, particularly Dugald Stewart.