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**The Place of Glasgow in *The Wealth of Nations*:
Caught between Biography and Text, Philosophical and Commercial History**

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Interrogating Absences in *The Wealth of Nations*

Economists rarely see the need to familiarise themselves with the detailed content of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, making do with trying to understand what Smith would have said had he been operating from their perspective. Specialist Smith scholars, by contrast, seek to locate his work in the specific time and place of its writing, reflecting on how this conditions both the structure and the message of the text. Amongst the many plaudits *The Wealth of Nations* has received from historians, it has been described as "the best commentary, not only upon the commercial and industrial legislation of the eighteenth century, but also upon many aspects of its public law" (Holdsworth 1935: 545). More generally, it has been called "a great period piece" (Fay 1956: 161).

However, the conclusion that *The Wealth of Nations* is an historically-rooted study of Smith's time and place has nonetheless given rise to competing readings of the text. Perhaps most obviously, was the immediate context for his reflections Britain in general or Scotland more particularly? Smith scholars who have lived or worked in Scotland are very much in the minority in the population of all Smith scholars, but they tend to side with the more particular reading. I think in this regard of specialists such as Roy Campbell, Alec Macfie, Ronald Meek, David Raphael, Ian Simpson Ross, Andrew Skinner and Thomas Wilson. In their hands, *The Wealth of Nations* is to be viewed as an account of how the Scottish lowland economy was changing in the middle of the eighteenth century and of how a permissive legal structure was simultaneously enabling Scottish merchants, artisans and manufacturers to become increasingly embedded in global economic networks. This does not mean that there are no other contexts visible in the text. Smith chose examples liberally from around Europe, including a good number from England, but there are far more drawn from Scotland than its size alone would warrant. Reading *The Wealth of Nations* in such a way is also not inconsistent with Smith's own claim in correspondence with Andreas Holt that he had made "a very violent attack ... upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain" (Correspondence 208). Scotland retained its own legal structure following the Act of Union, but for the whole of Smith's life it was bound by laws that were made by the British Parliament and applied to every part of Britain. A text with a Scottish feel can therefore still be enlisted to make claims against prevailing British policy choices.

An emphasis on the underlying Scottishness of Smith's text brings the reading into line with that of Smith's biographers. They always tend to write about his life in relation to how a specific place influenced his thinking at a specific time: be it his shorter stays in Oxford, Paris, Toulouse and London, or the roots he put down over lengthier durations in Glasgow, Kirkcaldy and Edinburgh. Glasgow, in particular, emerges from studies of the relationship between his life and work as the indispensable crucible for his economic thinking: be it the secular nature of its university life, Andrew Cochran's Political Economy Club, the city's increasing status as a hub for re-exporting produce from the English colonies, or its thriving commercial scene around the tobacco and sugar exchanges. As his Victorian

biographer John Rae (1895: 86) remarked, “it was those spirited merchants who had then so much to do with the making of Glasgow that had also something to do with the making of Adam Smith”. It can therefore come as a surprise to those who come to the text from a position that is sensitive to its underlying Scottishness just how little Glasgow is mentioned by name in the pages of *The Wealth of Nations*. It is referred to only three times, less than the tiny and, in his time, entirely isolated islands of Shetland.

Yet is this an absence of note? Two points must be made immediately by way of response.

First, Glasgow’s almost entire absence from *The Wealth of Nations* is only a puzzle to a reader who is expecting it to be there. Such an expectation, in turn, is more likely to have taken hold if they are part of a reading community which identifies an essential Scottishness in the text. Any reader is likely to be suggestible to what they are told they should be looking for in a book, and in recognising these socialised aspects of the reading experience they might ask themselves whether the multiple allusions to distinctively Scottish experiences are something that they would have been able to spot for themselves without forewarning. Smith’s biographers may well suggest that they are the most important background presence to the text, but Smith himself frequently moved quickly from discussing his examples in their own terms to discussing the general principles that arise from them. There is no reason to believe that this was anything other than deliberate on his part. For those whose reading community has developed beyond the influence of the Smith scholars who have lived and worked in Scotland, it would seem to be entirely natural to allow the eye to be drawn to the discussion of general principles at the expense of the examples. No suggestion of misdirection should be made against Smith in such cases, and what might appear to be an absence to one reading community is unlikely to do so to another.

Second, the fact that nowhere has more of its towns and cities mentioned by name than Scotland might be said to show that the text follows the name of the book in speaking to the development dilemmas of nations as a whole and not of any constituent units. Certainly there can be no suggestion that Smith might have held Glasgow to the same developmental sequence as Scotland – or, indeed, Britain – as a whole. As a consequence, the lack of attention to its specificities are not a sign that it has been consciously excluded on ulterior motives from a text that in any case does not characterise the development process at any level other than the nation as a whole. However, there are still questions that can be asked about its absence when its experiences at the time at which Smith was living there could be said to capture neatly in local form the complexities of the national development profile of the age. Glasgow cannot be substituted in any simple way for the nation of which it was a part, but it does exemplify many of the most important tendencies at play nationally. It had thriving town-and-country dynamics as it developed into the most important marketplace for both the produce arising from the agricultural improvements of the lowland Scottish economy and the manufacturing products that were fostered in the wake of those improvements. It also showed how local merchants were attempting to insert themselves into global economic dynamics on the back of protectionist policies that appeared to be at odds with those in which local town-and-country dynamics were flourishing.

The broader methodological issue of relevance to the special section as a whole is what to do when encountering an absence in a text. As these early reflections reveal, even to describe Glasgow as an absence in *The Wealth of Nations* requires at least two assumptions to hold, and those assumptions might well be generalised to the identification of any textual absence. On the one hand, it requires participation in a particular mode of reading based on a specific tradition's understanding of what type of book is under discussion. An absence might take on the character of an anomaly in one mode of reading but look entirely unremarkable in another. On the other hand, it requires participation in a particular mode of interpretation about the way in which the text comes together and the central story it is attempting to tell. An absence might appear to be a real puzzle in one mode of interpretation but a complete non-issue in another.

There is no simple way of resolving these differences, because they are likely to be linked to a scholar's prior learning experiences. However strong the methodological commitment to only reading what is on the page in front of them, such socialisation will almost certainly leave a noticeable imprint on reading practises. Some Smith scholars will be more inclined than others to treat the absence of Glasgow from *The Wealth of Nations* as something of note, but everyone is likely to confront a text at some stage which seems to reveal an absence to them. Working through this one specific case can therefore shed light on general principles of reading once an absence has been located, especially when additional historical material might be brought into conversation with an historically-oriented text. Much more can be discovered about Glasgow's economy in Smith's day than he chose to reveal, but what can be done with this important additional information?

Great care has to be taken not to present studies of the historical backdrop as missing information that can be given equal billing to the text itself. The identification of an absence is merely to indicate what was not said, but to turn it into something missing is to pass judgement that it should have been there but is not. Additional historical information can provide extra perspective, but it cannot substitute for the author's own words on the grounds that this somehow makes their analysis complete. For all of its suggestiveness and all of the speculation it might stimulate, a textual absence is not something that the reader should feel compelled to correct. It should be studied for what it is, because it is almost certainly going to be more interesting as an absence than as an access point for guessing what the author really meant to say. There is a substantial historical literature through which we can learn about the development of the Glasgow of his day, and some of the knowledge that flows from it could well have been known to Smith when he was writing *The Wealth of Nations*. It is always necessary to handle with care information that could not have been known to the author at the time because it relies on subsequent methodological advances, but it is possible to match the additional information that could have been known to Smith to his broad prescriptions for the process of economic development. Yet there is no basis for presenting it as the key that unlocks an essential meaning to the text that would otherwise remain hidden, even if it does facilitate new interpretations.

Glasgow as a Trading City

Only two of the three references to Glasgow in *The Wealth of Nations* contain any actual information about the city, and in both instances it is through a comparison with Edinburgh. The first contrasts Glasgow's incorporation into commercial society and its corresponding encouragement of new forms of trade with Edinburgh's continuing reliance on the economic overhang of feudal society (WN II.iii.12). This point is given extra rhetorical force in his *Lectures*, where Smith explained pre-commercial Edinburgh's higher rate of capital crimes through appeal to its middle classes' quasi-feudal desire to support a more populous and less inherently law-abiding servant community (LJ(A) vi.6, LJ (B) §204).

Glasgow's history as a trading city goes back perhaps as far as the construction of the first stone bridge across the Clyde in 1410 (Maver 2000: 7). By the time Smith moved there in 1737, it had a thriving local industrial scene captured by the phrase, "suggaries, roapary, soapary, and glassary" (Ross 1995: 34). Yet these particular commercial activities had congregated around the city in the first place only because its satellite port facilitated its development as an entrepôt (Hill 1999: 89). New industries sprung up to service the port, others to rework and resell the produce it landed, primarily from England's American colonies (McLean 2006: 3). Glasgow certainly made stuff over the span of the twenty-six years in which Smith was a resident, and he would have been well aware of these activities when collecting materials for *The Wealth of Nations*. However, the biggest proportion of the money then circulating in the city resulted from the recycling of profits made from buying and selling other people's products. The Glaswegian merchants who Smith counted amongst his friends, acquaintances and confidants were engaged primarily in the carrying trade (Campbell 1995: 186-7). They owned ships that sailed the Atlantic, taking manufactured goods from around Europe to England's American colonies on their outward journeys, before returning primarily with tobacco and sugar for onward sale throughout the continent (Archibald 2001: 63).

Such activities, though, sat uncomfortably alongside Smith's thoughts on the natural sequencing of the development process. This is not to say that all constituent units of a nation were required to follow its natural pattern, because this would be to elide arguments that exist at different levels of abstraction. It is only to note how a particular place can be a complex amalgam of different stages of the development process. In general, Smith argued, development followed from the careful investment of stock in economic activities that would enable initial holdings to grow and put "into motion the greater part of the useful labour of every society" (WN I.xi.p.10). The more productive the economic activities, the more rapid the development process. Agriculture, manufacturing, domestic trade and international trade all offered superior returns to the carrying trade, and therefore development should normally be assumed to proceed in this order. "[A] capital employed in the home-trade", Smith argued, "necessarily puts into motion a greater quantity of domestic industry, and gives revenue and employment to a greater number of the inhabitants of the country, than an equal capital employed in the foreign trade of consumption: and one employed in the foreign trade of consumption has the same advantage over an equal capital employed in the carrying trade" (WN IV:ii.6). Glasgow simultaneously acted as a local marketplace that facilitated the employment of 'useful labour', defined in terms of the activation of domestic industry, and as a global marketplace that brought money but

not wider sources of development to the city. It therefore acted through the encouragement of what Smith called 'the home-trade' to expand the wealth of the nation, but its involvement in the carrying trade meant that this was never to its full potential.

The source of Smith's disquiet with the carrying trade seems to have been partly his own theoretical system and partly what he observed in the world. His theoretical account of the development process appears in Book III of *The Wealth of Nations*, outlining how in the "natural course of things" an economy moves from the agricultural to the commercial stage by incorporating ever more expansive forms of trade. The discovery by John Lothian in 1958 of student transcripts of lectures Smith had delivered in 1762-1763 confirms the significance that he attached to his stadial theory of history (Coats 1975: 221), so much so that Ronald Meek (1971: 12-13) suggests that it should be treated as the lynchpin of his entire work. It is instructive, then, that the carrying trade – so crucial to Glasgow's wealth in Smith's day – receives no attention at all in Book III. Instead, all references are concentrated in Books II and IV, initially when Smith discussed the multiple ways in which capital might be deployed, and latterly when analysing various types of trading strategies.

When first introducing the concept of the carrying trade, Smith outlined two ways that it could impact on the economy's overall rate of development. The Glasgow merchants of his day most closely fitted the template of those who would "purchase such goods as are likely to be consumed by idle people who produce nothing, such as foreign wines, foreign silks, &c." (WN II.ii.33). He did not mention tobacco and sugar by name at this point, but these two staples of Glaswegian entrepôt activities were elsewhere labelled luxuries (Gilbert 1997: 283). Smith's verdict on such trade was damning in the extreme, having first contrasted it in unflattering terms to the alternative strategy to "purchase an additional stock of materials, tools, and provisions, in order to maintain and employ an additional number of industrious people" (WN II.ii.33). The means through which Glasgow's merchants had brought great wealth to their city, by contrast, "promotes prodigality, increases expence and consumption without increasing production, or establishing any permanent fund for supporting that expence, and is in every respect hurtful to the society" (WN II.ii.34). He returned to the carrying trade 160 pages later, in the meantime having outlined his stadial theory of history, but only to highlight the supposedly unnatural character of the turn to such activities. There, he wrote that "upon equal or nearly equal profits, every wholesale merchant naturally prefers the home-trade to the foreign trade of consumption, and the foreign trade of consumption to the carrying trade" (WN IV.ii.6). He would have been aware when doing so that the merchants of his closest acquaintance had no such preference.

Smith invoked a distinct temporal sequence based on what had to have come first according to his stadial theory of history. "The cultivation and improvement of the country, therefore, which affords subsistence, must, necessarily, be prior to the increase of the town, which furnishes only the means of conveniency and luxury" (WN III.i.2). A further crucial assumption follows, that in the initial stages of development capital invested in agriculture should be expected to deliver higher returns than in manufacturing, domestic trade and, in particular, international trade. Smith was insistent that it is only after agricultural profits had been suppressed below those available in manufacturing that anybody would choose to forego the psychological comfort of having their capital directly under their

“view and command” in the land and begin to look further afield (WN III.i.3). It was then that they would seek involvement in international trade in an attempt to capture a proportion of the profits available wherever in the world returns to agriculture remained high. The sting in the tale is reserved for the end of the chapter, when having revealed the stages of development consistent with his overarching system of natural liberty, Smith then told his readers that “all the modern states of Europe” had pre-emptively jumped to the stage of international trade, thus inserting themselves into an “unnatural and retrograde order” (WN III.i.9). Glasgow’s distinctive contribution to national economic dynamics in his day thus seems simultaneously to represent a transgression of the ‘natural course of things’ but by no means be an empirical outlier. Modern-day historical studies tend to suggest that Glasgow’s involvement in the eighteenth-century tobacco trade created a drag on both local and national economic development, seemingly in confirmation of Smith’s more generalised concerns (Devine 1976: 11).

This example raises important questions about when an apparent absence is genuinely that, and how to proceed having decided that an absence is of note. To present *The Wealth of Nations* as historically-rooted economic analysis requires the recognition that there is more than one historical register evident within the text. Two genres of global history writing were particularly in vogue in the mid eighteenth century: the philosophical and the commercial. Following the work of Jennifer Pitts (2017: 147-51) on Smith’s position in the history of historiography, there is now an important discussion in the specialist Smith studies literature about the degree to which he practised both (see also as precursors of this position, Pocock 1999: 322-6; Harkin 2005: 433-5; Rothschild 2012: 185). While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that the text of *The Wealth of Nations* divides straightforwardly between its philosophical history and its commercial history, in general the philosophical is consigned to Book III, sandwiched between a largely abstract analysis in Book II of the most appropriate deployments of capital and a more substantive discussion in Book IV of various commercial strategies that have put competing deployments of capital into operation. At the very least this is how the reading community that has developed in the wake of Pitts’s intervention is likely to approach *The Wealth of Nations*. Viewed from such a perspective, the past is linked to the present in Book III in a way that would have been required had the development process always obeyed the laws of natural liberty. But the actual ascent of the commercial age was much messier in practice, replete with policy compromises that the philosophical history looks suspiciously upon for not following the ‘correct’ sequence (Blecker 1997: 528). This is the textual disjuncture that the reader encounters when moving from Book III to Book IV. The philosophical history in general appears before the commercial history, and there is nothing in how the latter is relayed to suggest that Smith wished to retract the former. Importing additional information about Glasgow into the story would appear to strengthen the hand of the commercial history, but only if we allow ourselves to adjudicate using something that Smith chose not to include in his text. Indeed, if we acknowledge how many changes he made in the *Additions and Corrections* published with the third edition of 1784 without saying anything new of real substance about Glasgow, this looks like a choice he consistently reaffirmed. The absence of more information about Glasgow to flesh out the commercial history becomes the *continued* absence of more information about Glasgow, which is telling in itself.

Glasgow and the Colonial Trade

A similar issue arises when turning to Smith's praise for the positive influence of the city's banking structure on its broader economic development. This is the focus of the only other content-based reference to Glasgow in *The Wealth of Nations*, in which he stated that Scotland's major cities, plus the country as a whole, experienced economic growth that was proportional to the maturing of their banking structure. "[T]he trade of the city of Glasgow doubled in about fifteen years after the first erection of the banks there", we are told; "the trade of Scotland has more than quadrupled since the first erection of the two publick banks at Edinburgh"(WN II.ii.41). This claim is embedded in an historical register that appears to rely on informed gossip rather than philosophical reflection or the study of commercial legislation. "I have heard it asserted ... ", he admitted to his readers (WN II.ii.41). Presumably his sources were the friends he had within the merchant community, and in particular those who were branching out into the banking sector (on which, see Price 1954: 193). But why this interest in Glasgow's banks in the first place? After all, it is a distraction from how he described the development process in either the philosophical or the commercial register.

When situating himself within either genre of mid eighteenth-century global history writing, Smith located the origin of all expanding economic systems in practices of exchange. Commerce in all its forms takes place on the basis of exchanging surplus produce, we are told, and development occurs when the pool of exchangeable surplus produce gets ever bigger. It is activated by harnessing "the power to exchange all that surplus part of the produce of [a person's] own labour, which is over and above his own consumption, for such parts of the produce of other men's labour as he has occasion for" (WN I.iii.1). The abstract picture is of commerce spreading ever further outwards from a local source whenever the capacity to run down surplus stocks is exhausted closer to home: the other people to whom he refers start near but become ever more distant. As Emma Rothschild (2012: 185) suggests, "Smith's idyll of opulence was founded ... on a vista of the long-distance division of labor".

Glasgow receives another explicit mention in the *Lectures* when Smith explained to his students the "method invented by merchants to facilitate the payment of money at a distance", so that the physical separation of buyer and seller need not become an insurmountable obstacle to pushing the spatial coordinates of exchangeable surplus value ever further outwards (LJ(B) §283). In Smith's day, Glasgow was already deeply involved as an intermediary in the trade between England's American colonies and Europe, and this fact featured prominently in the example that appears in the *Lectures*. He asked his students to consider the "premium of exchange" that a bank would charge to ensure that a Glaswegian merchant could take ownership of surplus produce in London. He then urged them to think about how much higher this charge was likely to be when the trade was "between Virginia and Glasgow" (LJ(B) §284). Banks might therefore insert themselves in the long-distance trade that represents the highest stage of the development process, but they are not the trigger for that stage, as the first direct reference to Glasgow in Book II of *The Wealth of Nations* might be taken to imply. The trigger – as expressed theoretically in both the *Lectures* and *The Wealth of Nations* (III.i.7) – is when returns to trading between town and country at home have been compressed to the point at which merchants are willing to risk their money on more speculative ventures overseas.

Smith's example was certainly well chosen. Much to the annoyance of their English counterparts, Glaswegian merchants had come to control a disproportionate amount of the colonial trade from America, and they were heavily invested in Virginia (Murdoch 2010: 71). However, the banks they used to mitigate the 'premium of exchange' were frequently under their own proprietorship. That is, the city's tobacco and sugar interests and its banking interest were often embodied in the same people. As one notable example, Andrew Cochrane, John Glassford and Archibald Ingram, all prominent within the Glaswegian tobacco oligarchy, were also all partners in the Glasgow Arms Bank (Ross 1995: 154). It was founded in 1750 and kick-started a trend whereby tobacco merchants reduced the cost of their colonial trade by establishing banks (Devine 1995: 153, 2011: 61). This was also the beginning, we can presume, of the fifteen-year period of accelerated growth that Smith referred to in Book II. Access to capital was essential, because it enabled the tobacco merchants to transport manufactured goods on the outward journey to America to be sold on credit to the planters. The outstanding repayment schedule was then used to force down the price of the tobacco that they intended to land at Glasgow and sell on throughout Europe (Price and Clemens 1987: 7). The founding of the banks added further dimensions to the tobacco merchants' involvement in the global exchange of surplus produce, but the blurring of the line between Glasgow's tobacco interest and banking interest was possible in the first place only because the merchants already had a secure foothold in that global structure. This preceded in practice the moment at which the trigger for the move towards international trade should have taken place according to Smith's theory. Perhaps nothing else should have been expected, given the way in which the construction of Glasgow's satellite port and its position with respect to the trade winds allowed the city to acquire entrepôt status at an early point in its modern development. Its merchants were clearly in no mood to wait for the equalisation of trading profits between town and country locally before casting their eyes much further afield.

This is another instance where introducing more background information about Glasgow alongside the text of *The Wealth of Nations* reveals that Smith's underlying historical perspective was far from unified. It is also another instance in which interlocking membership of reading communities that assert the essential Scottishness of Smith's text and that follow Pitts's analysis of Smith's place in the history of historiography are likely to lead to further thoughts about Glasgow's absence from the book, but where membership of neither is likely to evoke no such concerns. The philosophical history visible in the text points to the movement through various stages of progress towards countries reciprocally satisfying one another's needs through a fully integrated system of purchasing each other's surplus produce. International trade works on the same principle as domestic trade within the philosophical history (perhaps most obviously in WN IV.v.b.39), but then the commercial history comes in to show that principle and practice are misaligned. The philosophical history of *The Wealth of Nations* suggests that the nation can be conceived as a single economic unit passing through various stages of development as one. However, its commercial history depicts more of a patchwork quilt effect, in which different parts of different localities are situated at different stages of the development process, with some clearly having compressed the individual steps to reach a higher stage than others. Eleven Scottish locations are mentioned by name in *The Wealth of Nations* – Ayrshire, Carron, Dumfries, Dunfermline, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leith, Lerwick, Lochaber, Shetland and the Western Isles – and what is most noticeable in these passages is the differences in their

contemporary experiences. Most of Scotland appears in its own locally-specific way to be economically unsuited to the rigours of international trade, but Smith's text shows that some places had already successfully made such a move, and additional historical information from beyond the text certainly exists to further such a claim.

The early adoption of international trade by some merchants leads to political disturbances within the system of natural liberty, which Smith went to great trouble to bring to his readers' attention. Investing in economic activities which are out of sight, he argued, is inherently more risky than investing in economic activities which take place under your nose. This is the source of his comment that "every individual naturally inclines" to trade within their national borders than beyond them (WN IV.ii.6). Interestingly, this is a claim that is shared between his commercial and philosophical history, because an almost identical wording also appears in Book III: "In seeking for employment to a capital, manufactures are, upon equal or nearly equal profits, naturally preferred to foreign commerce, for the same reason that agriculture is naturally preferred to manufactures" (WN III.i.7). The psychological discomfort associated with scaling up investments from agriculture to manufacturing to domestic trade to international trade can only be overcome, Smith suggested, by seeking shelter in government protection (Rothschild 2012: 186). The additional move made by so many of Glasgow's merchants – that of entering the carrying trade and consequently acting as an intermediary in the buying and selling of other people's products – merely ratchets this effect up still further. However, the clamour for assistance provided free rein to depart from the system of natural liberty, as Smith repeatedly highlighted throughout Book IV. This could be licensing sovereign rule by a chartered corporation in England's Indian colonies or, more pertinently for the Glaswegian merchants, enabling commercial monopolies to develop in its American colonies. The imposition of martial law, the eradication of the right to local self-determination and the use of slave labour all followed, every one of them a serious infraction of the system of natural liberty.

Conclusion

It is one thing attempting to understand how additional knowledge of the mid eighteenth-century Glaswegian economy might persuade us to explore the different historical registers in which *The Wealth of Nations* was written, but noting that Smith did not supply such information himself. It is something else to argue that Glasgow is not more prominent in the text *because* its development profile was often at odds with the economic principles of his system of natural liberty. The former implies a reading process in which an absence is identified simply as that. It may be characterised in relation to the structure of the rest of the text, which is what I have tried to do here, but no more than that. The latter involves the reader being more judgemental, presenting evidence to suggest that the text would have been constructed differently had Smith not been so eager to disguise the weaknesses in his position. However, the most we should feel comfortable concluding today is that Glasgow is simply not there as a generative feature of the text, nor that there is any necessary reason why it should have been, and not that it has gone missing in potentially suspicious circumstances. We simply do not know enough to move between these two claims. Besides, the additional contextual information available to us today suggests that Glasgow's position as both local marketplace for town-

and-country trade and intermediary for global trade rather confirms the astuteness of Smith's broader reflections.

Avoiding such leaps of faith in the reading process, though, does not invalidate further analytical work on the text. There are clearly fruitful avenues to explore if it is possible to place it into conversation with more detailed expositions of the historical setting out of which it arose. For a start, it is necessary to offer a qualification to the previous claim that Glasgow was all but written out of *The Wealth of Nations*. This is true in name only, not in essence. Glasgow is hardly mentioned explicitly, but the characteristics of mid eighteenth-century Glaswegian economic development pop up repeatedly throughout the text. Any place whose experiences shared even part of Glasgow's – a buoyant agricultural sector in close proximity to the city, thriving local town-and-country trade, and recently secured global connections via England's colonies – can be recognised in Smith's more abstract discussions. Glasgow might therefore be almost entirely absent by name in *The Wealth of Nations*, but there are many Glasgows present at this implicit level.

The identification of absences in Smith's text can spur further important questions about the relationship within it between philosophical and commercial history. The academic's temptation is usually to try to reconcile the two, but this is merely a variant of attempting to make good something that was missing from the original. It is almost certainly better to let the tension stand and to accept the possibility that it was deliberately inserted into the text so that it could be found, considered and discussed. However, even this cannot be the end of the story, because what might emerge as an obvious tension in a text within some reading communities will appear in others at best as a non-issue and at worst as a mischaracterisation of what is on the page. Recognition of how we are all socialised into expecting certain content to appear in a book can encourage greater reflexivity about the impact of prior scholarly socialisation on reading practices. My contribution to the special section has been to ask what might follow from the identification of an absence if we wish to avoid suggesting that an absence equals an error on the part of the author. Yet the example I have chosen – the absence of Glasgow at an explicit level from the text of *The Wealth of Nations* – will itself be likely divide scholars into their separate reading communities. Some will have the instinctive response that it is obvious that this absence exists, others that even if it does exist its acknowledgement is trivial, and others still that it requires a misreading of Smith's intentions to be thinking in such terms. My recommendation to let the content of the text guide the response to an absence can itself only be a partial answer, because different people will already have been socialised into different reading communities and will therefore view accordingly any claim that a text exhibits an absence.

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