



PROJECT MUSE®

---

An Unpublished Letter from Adam Smith to Sir John Macpherson

F. P. Lock

The Scottish Historical Review, Volume 85, Number 1: No. 219, April  
2006, pp. 135-137 (Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shr.2006.0020>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/199870>

## An Unpublished Letter from Adam Smith to Sir John Macpherson

Fewer than two hundred letters from Adam Smith are extant, surprisingly few for a figure of his time and eminence.<sup>1</sup> This paucity gives even a single additional letter greater interest than it might have from a more prolific correspondent. That printed here, like many of Smith's, is concerned with patronage and the context is known from other surviving letters. On 7 December 1786, Edmund Burke (1730-97) wrote to Smith on behalf of his close friend and 'cousin', William Burke (c. 1728-98), then serving in India as Deputy-Paymaster of the Forces, a position he owed to Edmund.<sup>2</sup> Burke feared that, under the new, reforming administration of Lord Cornwallis (1738-1805), who was on the point of leaving to take up his appointment as Governor-General, William's position was under threat. Burke therefore asked Smith to write to Colonel Alexander Ross (1742-1827; Cornwallis's secretary), and 'any other friends', on William's behalf. Smith duly wrote to Ross on 13 December, forwarding the letter to Burke himself. In a covering letter (which does not survive, but the purport of which can be inferred from Burke's reply of 20 December), Smith offered also to write to Sir John Macpherson (c. 1745-1821) and Sir Archibald Campbell (1739-91). In his reply, Burke made some suggestions about what Smith might say in these letters.<sup>3</sup> Macpherson, a member of the Supreme Council of Bengal, had succeeded as acting Governor-General in February 1785, when Warren Hastings resigned to return to England. Campbell was Governor of Madras.<sup>4</sup>

These letters to Macpherson and Campbell were presumed lost. That to Macpherson, however, is preserved among the collection of his papers now in the British Library (Oriental and India Office Collections, MS Eur. F. 291/161). It is addressed 'Sir John Macpherson | Baronet | Calcutta' and endorsed 'Adam Smith | 2d Jan[uar]y 1787 | received 15th August' and '252' (probably its number in the guard book into which it was formerly pasted).

Smith knew Edmund Burke reasonably well, though their friendship has left little trace in the epistolary record.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, they had

<sup>1</sup> E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross (eds), *The Correspondence of Adam Smith* [*Correspondence*] (2nd ed., Oxford, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Edmund called William his 'cousin', but the relationship remains undocumented. Edmund made the appointment during his brief period as Paymaster-General in 1782.

<sup>3</sup> *Correspondence*, 297-300.

<sup>4</sup> Smith had known Macpherson since at least 1778, and Campbell since at least 1759 (*Correspondence*, 57, 236). Campbell was appointed in 1785, and arrived in Madras in April 1786.

<sup>5</sup> The surviving letters are either complimentary (Burke to Smith on the publication of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*; Smith to Burke on his entering and leaving office), or

spent time together during Burke's visits to Scotland in 1784 and 1785, to be installed as Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow. Smith is likely to have made William's acquaintance in London during the late 1770s. Nothing in this letter suggests that he knew William well; indeed, as a recommendation it seems decidedly tepid, mentioning William's social qualities rather than his abilities. Nevertheless, Edmund thought it sufficiently strong to forward to Macpherson.

The second paragraph of the letter alludes to the predicament in which Cornwallis's appointment (in effect, his own supersession) placed Macpherson. Should he serve under Cornwallis, or return home? In the event, Macpherson left Calcutta on 29 January 1787, on the Berrington, before he could have received Smith's letter.<sup>6</sup> Cornwallis had a low opinion of William Burke, and regarded his Indian appointment as 'a most unnecessary job'.<sup>7</sup> Even so, Cornwallis did not displace him, probably to avoid any appearance of political vindictiveness. William remained as Deputy-Paymaster until he left India of his own accord in 1792.

#### My Dear Sir

The principal purpose of this letter is to recommend to your particular countenance and protection a Gentleman who, I believe, does not stand in need of any such recommendation, as he has written to many of his friends in very strong terms of the friendship and kindness w[hi]ch you have already shewn to him.<sup>8</sup> As some of Mr William Burkes friends, however, seem to imagine that my recommendation may be of some service to him, I cannot refuse telling you what, you probably know as well as I, that he is as honest, as kindhearted and as friendly a man as ever I knew in the whole course of my life. I am certain there is no trust which you can repose in him that he will not execute with the utmost zeal and fidelity.

The public is at present much divided in their opinion whether it is most likely that, in consequence of Lord Cornwallis's appointment, you will remain in India, or return to Europe. The general wish of the Public; I can venture to assure

<sup>5</sup> (*Continued*) requests for help (in 1775, for the renewal of Richard Champion's china patent; and in 1786 on behalf of William). Some indication that their friendship meant more than the paucity and formality of these letters might suggest is that two of Smith's three letters to Burke (1 Jul. 1782, 15 Apr. 1783) begin 'My dear friend', a salutation that Smith had previously reserved for David Hume, his closest friend (I owe this point to one of the *SHR*'s anonymous referees). The only other person whom Smith so addressed was Edward Gibbon (10 Dec. 1788). Burke's letters to Smith progress from the formal 'Sir' (10 Sept. 1759) through 'Dear Sir' (1 May 1775) and 'My dear Sir' (20 June 1783) to 'My dear friend' (7 Dec. 1786) and 'My dearest friend' (20 Dec. 1786). Burke, however, used 'My dear friend' more liberally than did Smith.

<sup>6</sup> *Calcutta Gazette*, 25 Jan., 1 Feb. 1787.

<sup>7</sup> Cornwallis to Lord Rawdon, 2 Dec. 1789, in C. Ross (ed.), *Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis*, 3 vols (London, 1859), i. 452.

<sup>8</sup> Burke asked Smith to tell Macpherson that William had made 'the strongest acknowledgements of his Kindness to him' (20 Dec. 1786, *Correspondence*, 300).

you, is that you should remain and continue to give all the assistance and information to the new Governour General which it is universally believed you are capable of giving. This is likewise the most earnest wish, so far at least as I can gather it, of your most zealous and particular friends.<sup>9</sup> I will not, however, presume to offer any advice upon the subject; as I have not the least doubt that you will do the precise thing which, in your situation, is most proper to be done. I have the honour to be, with the most affectionate remembrance,

My Dear Sir | Your most faithful | humble Servant | Adam  
Smith

Edinburgh | 2d Jan[ua]ry. 1787

*Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario*

F.P. LOCK

<sup>9</sup> This was the advice of his friend James Macpherson (1736-96): 'The Chapter of Accidents is an excellent one' (Cornwallis might die); 'nothing earthly can be gained by disgust'; and 'any precipitate Step' might interfere with his hopes for some 'reward, for services' (to Macpherson, 24 Dec. 1786; London, British Library (Oriental and India Office Collections), MS Eur. F. 291/126).