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History as Pedagogy and Weapon: The Origin of Doctrinal Histories of Economic Thought in Britain

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This paper offers a new perspective on the nature and methods of the history of economic thought by drawing on a sub-branch of history: the history of historiography. The focus is the formation of doctrinal history in Britain from the 1800s, with "doctrinal history" used as a shorthand to indicate those styles of writing the history of economic thought that study ideational referents such as doctrines, theory, systems, and principles. Dugald Stewart's commentary on Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) in his lectures on political economy from 1799–1810 is shown to be a key moment for the propagation of this style of history, not least because it was subsequently relayed to a general audience through the *Edinburgh Review*. David Ricardo then presented his *Principles of Political Economy, and Taxation* (1817) as doctrinally superseding Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, a stance adopted by J. R. McCulloch who published the field's first comprehensive text, *The Literature of Political Economy: A Classified Catalogue* (1845). The paper concludes by considering the longevity of doctrinal history in the present.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce historians of economic thought to an unfamiliar field: the history of historiography. It does so in a way that is intended to reveal its potency for reflecting on historiographical practice, narrating the emergence of the dominant form that the history of economic thought has taken in Britain since its beginnings in the 1800s: doctrinal history. "Doctrinal history" is here used as a shorthand for those styles of writing the history of economic thought that focus on hypostasized ideational referents such as "doctrines," "ideas," "systems," and "principles" that are taken to be the proper objects of historiographical inquiry.[1]

Doctrinal history, therefore, stands in contrast to document- and language-based historiography of the type that was—and remains—dominant in legal and diplomatic history, biblical criticism, philology, and intellectual history. In those fields, it is presupposed that the proper objects of historical investigation are the actual texts and their language, which are not understood as the mere material and linguistic expression of what doctrinal history takes to be the underlying content of doctrines, ideas, systems, and so on.

It should be acknowledged that combining the two styles in various ratios is possible. As will be discussed below, Edwin Cannan was a hybrid whose work on Adam Smith is still invaluable today, as was Piero Sraffa whose "surplus approach" to value theory emerged alongside his meticulous editing of David Ricardo's collected writings and correspondence. A more recent example is the late Istvan Hont who acquired an interest in political language after his adoption by Cambridge University in the 1970s, fusing it with his own brand of dialectical history to track the evolution of the history of political and economic thought.[2]

This raises the question of how to define a "style" or "tradition" of historiography. Drawing on the history of historiography, this paper treats a style or tradition of historiography as capable of being investigated and characterized in terms of several related variables: the historian's degree of institutional and intellectual specialization, the concrete skills that they cultivate, and the types of narratives that they produce and the cultural effects that they typically engender. Investigating these variables across European history has produced an impressive body of work.[3] The newcomer

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[1] Drawing on the work of Conal Condren, especially (1994) and (1997).

[2] Note, for example, how the fusion is signalled in the title of the first chapter of *Jealousy of Trade* (2005): "The language of sociability and commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the theoretical foundations of the 'Four-Stages Theory'."

[3] For accessible introductions see John Burrow (2009) and Anthony Grafton (2007). A seminal text is Arnaldo Momigliano (1950), while a recent survey of the field by one of its best practitioners is Dmitri Levitin (2012). The brightest (and heaviest) star is J. G. A. Pocock's six-volume study of Edward Gibbon's enlightenment historiography and its contexts, *Barbarism and Religion* (1999–2015).

may, therefore, appreciate the template of European historiography advanced by J. G. A. Pocock (2011), one of the sub-field's masters.

In Pocock's account, historiography began as political history, narrating the actions of leaders of the Mediterranean city-states and then the Roman Republic, exemplified by Thucydides and Tacitus. The aim was didactic, furnishing material for judging leaders' actions and their role in shaping the fate of the polities over which they ruled. This "civil history" was joined by two new styles of historiography that emerged in conjunction with the revelation of a single God in the fourth century: "sacred history" and "ecclesiastical history." This introduced the actions of God in creating and redeeming the world, and the workings of the churches and prophets that claimed to act in his name, as rival objects of study to the deeds of those wielding earthly power. From here centuries of conflict between these styles of history unfolded in correspondence with the jostling between churches, states, and empires that shaped political authority in Europe.

According to Pocock, this competition between civil and sacred history was complicated in the early modern period by the emergence of humanism, understood as the study of classical texts as models of literary style and as sources of examples of political wisdom. The humanist appreciation of these texts spurred the development of philological techniques that transformed their study: apart from their usefulness as stores of rhetorical techniques and political history, classical texts were now also apprehended for what they disclosed about the past through their *language*.

The new focus on language introduced mutations into civil, sacred, and ecclesiastical historiography because it became possible to demonstrate that apparently timeless philosophical and theological ideas had been formulated in particular times and circumstances, and even that some cherished doctrines in law, scripture, and political authority were either recently invented or fraudulent (Pocock 2011, 3). Lorenzo Valla's exposé of the Donation of Constantine in this manner is only the most famous instance of the destructive power that humanism could wield over the texts that it was intended to curate because of its focus on language (Camporeale 1996).

The more general point to note is that techniques of Valla's type forced upon Europeans the fact of historical change. That is, that past Europeans had lived and thought differently to the Europeans of the present; this was unsettling because of the status of ancient Greece and Rome as sources of wisdom and political values, with Roman Law and republican liberty as leading cases.[4] Some Europeans began to construe the differences between themselves and the Greeks and Romans in developmental

[4] For a majestic overview see volume one of Quentin Skinner (1978).

terms, thus viewing their ancestors as primitive, especially in relation to their disdain for those forms of commercial life that were beginning to dominate western Europe, with this sequence acquiring the label "stages of civilization" (Garrett 2023).

This is the point at which the history of economic thought emerges. Reflections on the nature of commerce and money began to be organized into treatise-length texts, permitting their authors to glance backward to earlier attempts to understand these phenomena, creating the impression of constant reflection on commerce and related practices, or what we tend to think of as "economics." If we take Adam Smith as a starting point, then in *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1976), Smith presumed that "commercial society" was the last stage of human history and that political œconomy was the semi-specialized science of that stage. Smith asserted that political œconomy had hitherto been developed in two systems, the mercantile system and the agricultural system, with the former system having been able to grow inside the British state because the rise of commerce gave influence to merchants who could twist laws and political maxims in their own favor. Smith, in short, treated political œconomy as thinking entangled with a way of life that he saw fit to criticize in the present for the benefit of legislators.

Smith's text was, therefore, an amalgam of civil history's concern with political instruction and the stadial or conjectural history with which the Scottish Enlightenment is now associated (Walter 2020). It is scarcely a basis for the history of economic thought as it came to be practiced in twentieth-century Britain and expressed in pioneering texts such as Alexander Gray's *The Development of Economic Doctrine* (1933) and Eric Roll's *A History of Economic Thought* (1938). Making the transition from Smith to this mature form of doctrinal history intelligible in historical terms is the aim of what follows.

The key argument is indicated in the paper's title: the two driving forces were the needs of teachers of political economy and intellectual conflict. That is, this style of historiography was not produced by professional historians who were trained in archival or philological techniques, but by political economists and economists who were trained in economic analysis and held strong views regarding the competing merits of rival doctrines, ideas, and intellectual systems. This led them to produce narratives focused on theoretical progress. In parallel, language-based styles of historiography developed independently over this same period—typically within departments of classics, ancient history and history, theology, and philology—and continued to focus on the recovery of the linguistic and historical meaning of the texts that they studied. This pattern largely continues into the present.

The account begins in late eighteenth-century Britain, a context in which there were neither professional economists nor a standalone economics degree and, unsurprisingly, no established field concerning the history of economic ideas (Tribe

2022a, 3–75). Instead, there was the ongoing process of the reception of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and his account of two competing systems of political œconomy. Doctrinal history formed in Britain in three contexts, all of which were connected to Smith's text. The first is Dugald Stewart's commentary on *Wealth of Nations* as the focus for his lectures on political economy from 1799–1810. The second context is David Ricardo's claim to doctrinal supersession of Smith in his *Principles of Political Economy, and Taxation* ([1817] 1951–73, 1). The final context is the most important: J. R. McCulloch's pioneering work to establish the history of political economy as a field of inquiry, realized in polished form in his *The Literature of Political Economy* (1845). The final section sketches the resilience of McCulloch's template for doctrinal history in the face of competition from document- and language-based approaches to the history of economic thought.

1. Dugald Stewart and the *Edinburgh Review*

Dugald Stewart succeeded Adam Ferguson in 1785 as Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh. In this Scottish university context, it was taken for granted that Stewart's office was to shape the moral and intellectual bearing of the next generation of lawyers, doctors, and legislators. Moral philosophy was presumed essential to this task in two linked senses. First, it provided the pedagogical means for inducting elite males into an ethical culture of "politeness" and "virtue." Second, it provided an intellectual framework with which these same students could conceive of politics and the art of lawmaking (Phillipson 1983; Sher 1985). In Stewart's hands, lawmaking was the subject of political economy, which he elevated from sub-branch of the science of legislation to the master discipline for directing societies towards national happiness (Haakonssen 1996, 226–60).

In doing so, Stewart used his philosophy of mind to detect the direction of human progress in terms of its morality, social arrangements, and philosophy. This progressive streak is on full display in his two-volume *Dissertation Exhibiting a General View of the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical and Political Philosophy, Since the Revival of Letters in Europe*, published in 1815 and 1821. Stewart set out his approach in the first part of this study in terms that contradistinguished him from text- and language-based historians. He declared that he would only discuss the "great *lights of the world* by whom the torch of science has been successively seized and transmitted" because they alone "furnish matter for philosophical history" (1854, 1:23–4, original emphasis). This meant that Stewart's account would not engage in the "minuteness of the mere bibliographer" or "antiquary" nor pursue their "erudition and philology" (1854, 1:23, 25, 27). As we will see, Stewart adopted the same progressivist approach to the history

of political economy and taught his students to relate to this new science as moving successively closer to the truth. First, however, it will be helpful to bring to view the "erudition and philology" that Stewart was spurning.[5]

An indicative example of such scholarship is Richard Porson (1759–1808), Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge (1792–1808). He came to general notice for his intervention into the controversy over I John V.7, ruthlessly exposing the poor scholarship of those defending the interpolated reference to the Trinity in the Book of John, shown here in square brackets: "There are three that testify [in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are One]" (Coogan 2018, I John 5:7).

The significance of this insertion was charged by debates of the time regarding when the doctrine of the Trinity emerged and, in consequence, its standing as an article of true Christian faith. Porson was open about the fact that the stakes of the contest were maximal, relating to orthodoxy, heresy, and bigotry, such that even those who were devout believers in the Trinity could be attacked for failing to "defend it in the catholic manner, and with the catholic texts" (Porson 1790, 18). Yet that the test of "evidence" was separate to faith was a tenet of scholarship that had been accepted since Erasmus: "the external authority of any text in scripture is founded on the concurrence of ancient MSS. [manuscripts] of ancient versions, and citations of ancient writers" (1790, 21). Inspecting this evidence showed that the Trinity text was a corruption.

As the case of Porson shows, the study of texts in this manner required a technical mastery of languages and an ethical mastery of one's own beliefs sufficient to allow the scholar to open their research to textual evidence that could undermine their spiritual commitments. This ethical burden was identified by one of Porson's Cambridge contemporaries, Herbert Marsh (1757–1839), who also studied in Germany and was elected to the Lady Margaret Professorship of Divinity at Cambridge in 1807. If we turn to his *An Essay on the Usefulness and Necessity of Theological Learning* (Marsh 1792), then one of his key precepts was that the "historian ought to be of no party, an interpreter [. . .] of no sect" because the biggest obstacle to discovering the meaning of the text was to "enter on the inquiry with a system already adopted" (1792, 8). To guard against this risk, the interpreter was to seek only to understand what the writer sought to express, which required transplanting oneself into their situation as far as possible, then deploying the technical repertoire of the interpreter: the "words of the original must be critically and grammatically weighed [. . .] having obtained the necessary knowledge

[5] Scholarship of this type had been entrenched throughout western Europe's universities by the end of the seventeenth century (Levitin 2012).

of the sentiments and modes of thinking, which prevailed" (1792, 10). As Marsh later put the point in his *History of Biblical Interpretation* (1828, 506), the goal of this style of inquiry was to recover the "grammatical or literal sense" of the texts under study.

If that discussion will serve to clarify what Stewart's contemporaries would have understood by his reference to "erudition and philology," then we can now return to his approach. In brief, Stewart did not study either the texts of moral philosophy or political economy in this manner because he was not interested in their grammatical and literal meanings or in their possible corruption over time. Instead, Stewart was interested in the system to which these texts belonged and the theories that they offered. The key text in Stewart's political economy course was constant from its beginning in 1799 until his retirement from teaching in 1810, and to which his lectures can be understood as an extended reader's guide: Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

In Stewart's words, his aim was to "suggest matter for future consideration" not to "support any particular system," but he took it for granted that Smith's text was the best that the field could offer at that moment, hence a student's "future consideration" ought to begin by reading that text again (1854, 8:288). Stewart concentrated on the lodestar of Smith's text, national wealth, but found himself obliged to navigate the "peculiarities of language and doctrine by which Mr. Smith's system is distinguished from that of the French Economists," and noted that Smith had not "placed the doctrine of the Economists in a just point of view" (8:253, 255). Stewart gave himself the task, in other words, of presenting the clash between Smith and the Economists by focusing on their disagreement over the nature of wealth. It was in relation to this task that Stewart transmitted a style of doctrinal history to his students.

Stewart began his account of Smith by noting that he treated wealth as the exchangeable value of the annual produce arising from a nation's land and labor, with labor representing the more important element. This was supposedly a position shared by John Locke and David Hume (Stewart, 1854, 8:255–56).[6] According to Smith, the ratio of productive to unproductive labor, and the advantages arising from the division of labor, determined the quantity of annual produce. At this point, Stewart noted that, although Smith distinguished between "productive labour" and "unproductive labour," Stewart would substitute the word "effective," and then complained about the arrangement of Smith's work (8:255–58). In short, even in his opening comments, Stewart had assimilated Smith's treatment of wealth to the divergent accounts found in Locke's natural law tract and Hume's essays, then changed Smith's language, and

[6] Stewart gives Book II, ch. v, "Of Property," paras. 41 and 43 in Locke's *Of Civil Government* and Hume's "Essay on Commerce."

then lamented Smith's order of presentation.[7] As this rendering suggests, Stewart's aim was not fidelity to Smith's text and language but simplification to facilitate comparison and synthesis in a pedagogical setting. To be plain, the point to underline is that "erudition and philology" of the type noted above were not deployed in Stewart's history of political economy.

A similar claim can be made regarding Stewart's exegesis of the Economists. Indeed, in his notes, Stewart stated that his goal was to present "a faithful exposition of their general doctrines" but not "any full transcript of their writings" in the name of "simplifying the subject" and "freeing it of the prolixity and technical phraseology of its authors" (8:259). Stewart justified this move with reference to the advantages that arose from arranging and expressing technical claims in a scientific manner. We are thus encountering the claim that scientific progress provides a warrant for improving upon the messiness and imperfections found in historical texts (a claim that is also found in today's doctrinal histories).

Armed with this brief, Stewart returned to Smith, scrutinizing his claim that an artificer reproduced the value of their labor's expense plus the capital by which they were employed. The labor of the artificer and the labor of the menial servant differed because the latter produced no revenue and their toil did not fix itself in a vendible commodity.[8] This claim contrasted with the account of the Economists who painted the artificer as unproductive, representing what Smith construed as the Economists' "capital error" (8:272). Stewart judged that Smith was on the losing side of this debate because his distinction between the artificer's labor and the servant's was poor political economy. That is, Smith had amplified a trifling issue because he had adopted the perspective of the employer who used their capital to support the artificer's labor when Smith should have viewed the issue from the point of view of the nation's wealth. Seen from that vantage, Stewart claimed, the important point was that agriculture lay at the base of exchange and wealth; Smith's "doctrine" was thus destined to be forgotten by the science (8:265, 273, 279).

It is worth noting here that Stewart used the word "doctrines" with a large degree of substitutability with proximate terms, including "fundamental principles," "opinions," "fundamental article," "theory," "reasoning," and "system." Here is an instructive passage regarding the last term:

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[7] See, for example, how Hume's analysis was utterly different because it was still tethered to the concern with state power, with manufacturing labor acting as a store of labor that the state could conscript (Walter 2011, 73–6).

[8] See *WN* II.iii.1–2.

> That the writings of the authors by whom the system was first explained; those of Quesnai (in particular,) of Turgot, and of the Marquis de Mirabeau, will amply repay the labour of a very diligent perusal to all who turn their attention to these studies, I can venture to pronounce with confidence: and it is only after examining the different parts of the system in their relation to each other and to the whole, that a correct judgment can be formed of their scope and of their importance. In this view, I am somewhat afraid, that by dwelling so long on a detached and preliminary article, I may have created a prejudice against a doctrine, about which I was anxious to excite your curiosity. (8:289)

This passage is evidence that Stewart conceived of "systems" as capable of being authored by more than one person and as composed of "articles" and "doctrines."[9] The more general point to note is that all of Stewart's referents—systems, doctrines, opinions and so on—needed to be conjectured from the texts under study. Once conjectured, Stewart was prepared to change the language of their presentation in the source text in the pursuit of pedagogical and scientific—not historiographical—aims.

Stewart's approach to the history of political economy enjoyed transmission to a broad public through his pupils. A key mechanism for its dissemination was the *Edinburgh Review*, founded by certain of his students—Francis Lord Jeffrey, Francis Horner, Sydney Smith, and Henry Brougham. In its early years, these and other pupils provided the *Review* with most of its copy and the journal quickly came to dominate the market in London (Plassart 2015, ch. 7). It should be acknowledged that, as with students today, the reviewers were selective about what they took from their teacher. Francis Lord Jeffrey, for example, was prepared to write an unkind precis of Stewart's philosophy for the *Review*, claiming that metaphysics of this type would not lead to new scientific discoveries ([Jeffrey] 1810; Paoletti 2012). Similarly, Francis Horner was pursuing his own course of reading as he attended Stewart's lectures, making mixed assessments about the latter (Bourne and Banks Taylor 1994, 39–44). Equally illustrative is James Mill, who reinterpreted what he had learned from Stewart after his encounter with Jeremy Bentham in 1807 (Plassart 2019), straining his relationship with the reviewers in consequence (Fontana 1985, 160–70). In other words, reception is always complicated. Nevertheless, evidence of the transmission of Stewart's brand of doctrinal history can be seen in the case of two of his students, Henry Brougham and James Maitland, the Earl of Lauderdale. Brougham played a leading role in reviewing

[9] Here Stewart may have taken his cue from the French writers whom he was glossing. For an overview of their disputes over *système* and *doctrine* see Michael Sonenscher (2007, 189–222).

works of political economy in the early numbers of the *Review*, including, as it happened, Lauderdale's *An Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Public Wealth* (Maitland 1804).[10]

Lauderdale was born only a few years after Stewart and had been a Scottish peer, hence his writings on political economy were part of a larger public life. In his *Enquiry*, he defined "Public Oeconomy" as a science intended to "teach the means of increasing the wealth of a State, and of applying it to the most useful purposes" (Maitland 1804, 3). Yet the science was hampered because of its imprecise language, leading the Earl to use "riches" to name private fortune and "wealth" to indicate the prosperity of a state (Maitland 1804, 8–9). The next two chapters then took up the question of the proper meaning of "value," paving the way for the third chapter to consider rival candidates as the source of wealth, while the fourth and fifth chapters examined the means for increasing wealth. It was in the third chapter that Lauderdale replayed the clash between the Economists and Smith as presented by Stewart.

Lauderdale described the Economists as merely the most recent representatives of a "system" that was premised on the "opinion" that land was the sole source of revenue (Maitland 1804, 112). Its earlier adherents included Artaxerxes I, King of Persia,[11] Lewis Roberts's *Treasure of Traffic* (1641), Locke's essay on lowering the rate of interest, and Jacob Vanderlint's *Money Answers All Things* (1734). The rival commercial system was not as old, but it had gained ground in England since the early seventeenth century. At this point, Lauderdale's (Maitland 1804, 370–75) text directs the reader to a six-page appendix of extracts that evidenced the commercial "system" at work in England and Britain, including a speech by Sir Thomas Roe in Parliament in 1640 and Josiah Child's *A Discourse* [*About*] *Trade* (undated in Lauderdale's text). Here is an early example of the publication of primary sources as an adjunct to polemically-oriented historiography in the history of political economy.

Lauderdale affirmed that the commercial system was fundamentally flawed, as demonstrated by Smith in his *Wealth of Nations*. Although Smith was owed thanks for making this clear to future generations of statesmen, he had failed, according to Lauderdale, to resolve in his own mind where the true source of wealth lay. This obliged Lauderdale to take up the task, which he did by commenting critically on long excerpts from both Smith and the Economists to sift their arguments for truth. Lauderdale's thesis was that land, labor, and capital were all "original sources of wealth" (Maitland 1804, 121). Sections of the discussion clearly repeat material that Stewart delivered in

[10] This episode has been noted before for revealing the influence of Stewart's teaching (Collini, Winch, and Burrow 1983, 51). By reviewing the work, Brougham had saved Francis Horner from the prospect of criticizing a Whig peer whose support he needed for his career in politics. See Bourne and Banks Taylor (1994, 18).

[11] Lauderdale sourced his quotation from Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (1781, 256).

his lectures, including the assessment that Smith was on the losing side of his contest with the Economists over the nature of wealth, and the unsatisfactoriness of the distinction between productive and unproductive labor (Maitland 1804, 136, 149–51). In fact, at one point Lauderdale wrote that Smith's attempted refutation of the claim that the artificer's labor was unproductive had backfired so badly that it actually stood as a "confirmation of the doctrine of the œconomists" (Maitland 1804, 136).

As with Stewart's lectures, here we have an approach to texts and ideas that focuses on doctrines, opinions, and systems, and which is prepared to group authors into systems based on resemblances between their opinions, as when Lauderdale found that Artaxerxes I was an early physiocrat. In summary, not only had Lauderdale realized Stewart's hope that his students might direct a "diligent perusal" (Stewart 1854, 8:289) to texts that discussed the nature of wealth, but he had drawn on his own bibliographical inclinations to furnish the public with new resources for constructing such a history through his appendix.

What did Brougham make of Lauderdale's purported contribution to the science? Very little. Brougham began his review by noting that the book concerned "abstract doctrines" or "the pure metaphysics of political economy" ([Brougham] 1804, 344).[12] That the text had this character meant that it was not to be judged with reference to practical questions of policy but as a speculative piece of reasoning. In this vein, Brougham would examine both Lauderdale's "doctrines" and the "theory" of the Economists and Smith ([Brougham] 1804, 346). In relation to the latter's doctrines, Brougham was concerned to defend Smith against certain of Lauderdale's attacks for inconsistency, especially regarding Smith's account of labor as a measure of value. Noteworthy here is Brougham's accusation that Lauderdale had relied on selective quotation, especially regarding labor as an invariable measure of value:

> we are disposed to think that our author avails himself of certain obscurities, and even inconsistencies in Dr. Smith's language, for the purpose of fastening upon him a much more contradictory and erroneous theory than he ever maintained. That a person of Dr. Smith's metaphysical and mathematical powers should have meant to predicate the absolute immutability of any standard, we cannot for a moment imagine [. . .] We apprehend that he only sought for an approximation. ([Brougham] 1804, 349)

[12] Authorship attributed by Fetter (1953, 244).

Notice how Brougham's defense of Smith did not proceed by adducing more textual evidence than Lauderdale or by attending to it more carefully—an eminently available avenue in this case—but by invoking Smith's reputation. Equally consistent with being one of Stewart's former students familiar with his lectures on Smith and the Economists, Brougham had no objection to Lauderdale's manner of presenting Smith and the Economists in terms of doctrines and theories. We, therefore, have evidence that, at least in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review*, this manner of presenting political economy was becoming familiar. As we will see, David Ricardo, a reader of the *Review*, would also adopt this approach to the science.

Putting these assessments together, Brougham's ultimate opinion was that Lauderdale had made the most meagre of contributions to political economy: he had not advanced beyond the work of Smith and the Economists but only occluded the subject with imprecise language ([Brougham] 1804, 353–54). This assessment provided Brougham with a rationale for using the remainder of his review to provide his own and more effective introduction to nature and development of the "fundamental doctrines of political economy" in order to "facilitate the study" and "progress" of the science ([Brougham] 1804, 377).[13] As was the case in Stewart's lectures, the statement of political economy's content in doctrinal terms was justified on pedagogical grounds: it is easier for students.

To close this section, it can be briefly noted that there is evidence that this style of exegesis of political economy was also being deployed by English writers on political economy. A good example is Benjamin Vaughan and his *New and Old Principles of Trade Compared* (1788). Vaughan was a member of the enlightened circle around William Petty, the second earl of Shelburne, whose members hoped that the spread of free trade would end mercantile wars (Whatmore 2023, 84–95). It is, therefore, not surprising to find Vaughan advocating for the "free system of commerce"—in reliance on the Economists and Smith—and its "principles" (Vaughan 1788, vii–xii). More important for the argument here is that Vaughan organized all previous European writers into two groups: those of "free trade" and those of "monopoly," the latter a renamed version of Smith's "mercantile system," and that Vaughan used extended notes at the bottom of his pages to quote indicative passages from a range of authors.

Equally revealing of English developments is the second edition of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which also adopted Smith's split between the "agricultural

[13] His essential argument was that both Smith and the Economists were wrong to attempt to seek original or superior sources of wealth, for the exchange of goods and the division of labor that it underwrote ought to be conceived as a machine in motion—there was simply no point in asking which part was the origin of the movement of the whole.

and commercial systems" and focused on the economists as the representatives of the former (Malthus [1803] 1986, 3:670–80). Another English example is Daniel Wakefield's inquiry into the doctrines of Physiocracy, *An Essay Upon Political Œconomy* (1804). The stated aim was "discovery of the truth" regarding these "principles" and, similarly to Stewart, texts were organized according to their "doctrines" on the true source of value, which yielded some striking groupings: Malthus and the Chinese, the Persians and Turgot (Wakefield, 1804, 3–8, 85–6). Also like Lauderdale, Wakefield was prepared to cast his net far and wide, at one point grouping together Aristotle, Locke, and James Mackintosh on property without naming a text from any of them (1804, 86).

This evidence suggests that a style of textual exegesis was developing in Britain that can be described as intellectual, abstract, and hence flexibly connected with the texts and language under study. In relation to the history of historiography, the key point is that the history of political economy was being curated by political economists who held their own doctrinal commitments and believed that scientific progress in those doctrines was at hand. They did not pursue textual scholarship of the type described above in relation to Porson and Marsh, where the aim was to clarify the meaning and authenticity of a text. In fact, in making their own assessments on the doctrinal correctness or error of the texts that they glossed, the political economists were similar to the opponents of language-based study, the Archdeacon of Chester and Dugald Stewart.

2. David Ricardo's Doctrinal Correction of Smith: Doctrinal History as Weapon

Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy, and Taxation* ([1817] 1951–73, 1) was initially conceived as an extension of his *Essay on Profits* ([1815] 1951–73, 4). The *Essay* had, in turn, built on Robert Malthus's *Inquiry into Rent* ([1815] 1986, 7) by using Malthus's definition of rent to develop an account of the principles by which it was regulated. To summarize Ricardo's *Essay*: in an imagined situation, the extension of cultivation drags down profitability across agricultural industry, allowing landlords to extract as rent whatever profit differential may happen to exist on the particular land that they leased to tenant farmers and the lowest rate of profits in the sector. Ricardo presented this account as confirming the "general doctrines of the advantages of a free trade" (4:9). The *Principles* kept this core analysis of profits and rent but extended it to the entire economy by producing a novel account of value as determined by the quantity of labor required for a commodity's production. Ricardo treated these innovations as a source of scientific breakthrough, declaring in his preface that without "the true doctrine of rent" it was "impossible to understand" the core issues of political economy (1:5).

This focus on correct doctrine pervaded the entire text, which was written by noting the false doctrines of established writers—pre-eminently Smith, Malthus, and Say—and then correcting them. The following exchange between Ricardo and Mill is instructive, in which Ricardo asked for counsel regarding what to include in the *Principles*:

> R: In reading Adam Smith, again, I find many opinions to question [. . .] Would you advise me to notice every thing in his book which I think wrong? ([1816] 1951–73, 7:100)
>
> M: With regard to those parts of Adam Smith, where his opinions are at variance with your principles, I think you are called upon to take notice of his errors [. . .] chiefly, nevertheless, attaching yourself to the errors which the application of your principles illustrates and exposes. ([1816] 1951–73, 7:107–08)

Notice how the application of foreign principles to a text is simply assumed to reveal "errors," not a different purpose, genre, or style of argument. All such variation is assimilated by the march of doctrinal advance. Indeed, this ambition was even raised to titular significance on several occasions, such as chapter 24, "Doctrine of Adam Smith Concerning the Rent of Land," and chapter 29 (first edition), "Mr. Malthus's Opinions on Rent." What should be noted is that doctrinal supersession was the way that Ricardo construed his contribution to political economy.

To put the same point another way, what we might call the "outputs" of Ricardo's political economy were his new "doctrines," which could be contrasted with the false "doctrines" of earlier authors as construed by Ricardo's reading of their texts in search of such doctrinal claims. For the history of historiography, Ricardo is important because his disciple, John Ramsay McCulloch, imported this approach and Ricardo's doctrines into his historiography when pioneering the genre in his *The Literature of Political Economy* (1845). That is, the first specialized text in the history of political economy adopted as its object of study the "outputs" of a combative theorist. If we glance back to Richard Porson's studies of the Bible, then it is hopefully clear how different an arrangement was on display in that style of historiography: Porson's object of study was the historical veracity of texts, utterly removed from the "outputs" of his historical subject—the spiritual claims of John the Apostle.

To read Smith as developing doctrines concerning agriculture, Ricardo needed to piece together disparate parts of the *Wealth of Nations*. It will be remembered that Smith had isolated agriculture as special by using the ornate notion that "nature labours along with man" and "her labour costs no expence" ([1776] 1976, II.v.12). Accordingly, rent

arose as a surplus payment made possible by the land's fecundity. In manufacturing, by contrast, nature did not labor, all was man, and no rent was afforded in consequence. But, awkwardly, Smith had also discussed rent as a monopoly payment, in Book I, that the landlord extracted from the farmer (I.xi.a.1, 6). This instability in Smith's argument was not as important as his claim that agriculture was special owing to nature's free labor since it was this precept that allowed him to identify the natural path to opulence for all nations. Namely, for capital to first be concentrated in agriculture where the greatest quantity of productive labor was supported. This drove the central argument of Book III of *Wealth of Nations*: Europe had followed a "retrograde" path in which wealth accumulated in the towns, not the country, because of the institutional peculiarities of post-Roman Europe. This, in turn, paved the way for Smith's account of the "Mercantile System" in Book IV, where the endless restrictions and privileges that the merchant class had managed to extract from the legislature continued to draw capital to overseas trade. By doing so, the merchants were frustrating a process that would otherwise have appeared providential in its ability to naturally favor agriculture, the special sector.

For his part, Ricardo also rendered agriculture as special, but in the opposite way to Smith. In chapter 2, "On Rent," Ricardo created an analogy between nature and machinery: In industrial production all the machines were equal; in agriculture the machines were pieces of land, and lands differed in quality. Because of this variety in nature's machines there was variety in the profitability accruing to agricultural capital, and the variety was equalized by the extraction of rent.[14] This line of argument blocked Smith's account of agriculture, and Ricardo explicitly targeted this notion when he wrote that "Nothing is more common than to hear of the advantages which the land possesses over every other source of useful produce, on account of the surplus which it yields in the form of rent" (1:75). Rather, land was both finite and variable in quality, in contrast to other natural agents, such as air and the elasticity of steam, which were unlimited in supply and constant in their quality. From here, Ricardo could explicitly correct Smith on the nature of rent.

The correction came in the form of a long footnote in which Ricardo quoted the relevant passages from Book II of *Wealth of Nations* where Smith had written that "nature labours along with man," in contrast to manufacturing, where "nature does nothing; man does all" (II.v.12). In these passages Smith was using his notion of productive labor to distinguish between different employments of capital from the point of view of a nation that valued wealth. This exercise yielded the hierarchy of

[14] Ricardo also imagined variety in profitability in relation to increments of capital being applied to the same unit of land, that is, the so-called "intensive case" (1:71–2).

capital employments that Smith used to dispute the arguments of the "agricultural" and "mercantile" systems. Where the Physiocratic system insisted that manufactures were sterile, Smith was able to show that, in fact, this use of capital was the second most beneficial to the community; where the mercantile system held that overseas trade deserved the greatest encouragement, Smith could show that it did not because it employed the smallest quantities of productive labor. Ricardo targeted both claims in his refutation of Smith. Of course, the refutation did not concern Smith's account of the ideal development path for a nation to follow and the enduring consequences of Europe's retrograde order—about which Ricardo had nothing to say—but, rather, Smith's failure to anticipate Ricardo's own labor theory of value.

Ricardo's first step was to show that Smith's privileging of agriculture was based on an error: Rent was not paid because nature labored for free, but because nature extracted an increasingly high price for its work as a nation grew in population. As Ricardo wrote, "In proportion as she [nature] becomes niggardly in her gifts, she exacts a greater price for her work" (1:76n). Smith's claim that in manufacturing nature contributed nothing was also wrong, Ricardo held, because the elasticity of steam, the role of heat in softening metals, and the nature of wind and water were all examples of nature's role in manufacturing.[15] Ricardo construed these examples as clear evidence that there was not "a manufacture which can be mentioned, in which nature does not give her assistance to man, and give it too, generously and gratuitously" (1:76n). Ricardo was explicitly targeting and overturning Smith's central claim regarding the nature of rent and the privileged role of agriculture in producing national wealth, even to the extent of translating his own arguments into Smith's anthropomorphic image of nature as a productive laborer.

Ricardo underlined his supersession of Smith on this point by quoting a lengthy passage from Buchanan's edition of *Wealth of Nations* in which Buchanan presumed to correct Smith for his treatment of agriculture.[16] The effect of Ricardo's quotation was to suggest that, whether one learned it from reading a modern edition of Smith or from reading Ricardo, one ought to know that rent was the result (and not the cause) of a high price of corn. In Ricardo's presentation, Smith's errors on the principle of rent seriously compromised his credentials as a political economist because of the topic's central place in the science. Ricardo's overriding claim was that "clearly understanding this principle is, I am persuaded, of the utmost importance to the science of political economy" (1:77n).

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[15] A similar line of argument against Smith had been taken in ([Brougham] 1804, 359–60).

[16] Buchanan (1817, 2:55n).

Ricardo's doctrinal correction of Smith was continued in chapter 24, "Doctrine of Adam Smith Concerning the Rent of Land." The chapter began as the title would suggest, with a quotation in which we supposedly find Smith's "doctrine" of rent being articulated, with Ricardo italicizing the key passage for his readers:

> "SUCH parts only of the produce of the land," says Adam Smith, "can commonly be brought to market, of which the ordinary price is sufficient to replace the stock which must be employed in bringing them thither, together with its ordinary profits. If the ordinary price is more than this, the surplus part of it will naturally go to the rent of land. *If it is not more, though the commodity can be brought to market, it can afford no rent to the landlord.* Whether the price is, or is not more, depends upon the demand. (1:327)

Ricardo judged this to be a correct statement, writing that the passage would "lead the reader to conclude that its author could not have mistaken the nature of rent" (1:327). Alas, Smith had. At this point Ricardo deployed one of the defining moves of doctrinal history—asserting that a present-day insight was glimpsed by a pioneer but not grasped, leaving the complete and confident possession of scientific truth to wait for a later generation, in this case, the generation of Malthus and Ricardo.

Smith's mistake, according to Ricardo, arose because he was at times susceptible to "the notion" that agriculture was special because food created its own demand and thereby ensured that land would always pay rent to the landlord (1:327). This account clashed with Ricardo's treatment of rent whose rebuttal of Smith took the form of a dogmatic reassertion of his own reasoning by imagining a farmer whose actions corresponded with Ricardian rent theory:

> If a farmer agrees for land on a lease of seven or fourteen years, he may propose to employ on it capital of £10,000, knowing that at the existing price of grain in raw produce, he can [...] obtain the general rate of profit. He will not employ £11,000, unless the last £1000 can be employed so productively as to afford him the usual profits of stock. (1:328)

This claim is repeated over and over in the same paragraph, on the basis of which Ricardo then declared that "if the comprehensive mind of Adam Smith had been directed to this fact, he would not have maintained that rent forms one of the component parts of the price of raw produce" (1:329). With the infelicities of Smith's doctrinal exposition amended in this fashion, he was ready to take his place as a worthy but flawed predecessor of Ricardo.

It is of course true that Ricardo's exegesis of Smith was not intended to produce historiographical knowledge but to demonstrate the intellectual superiority of his own arguments. Yet what is important is that Ricardo's argumentation shared the methods of doctrinal history—adopting a standpoint from within contemporary debate, construing texts not in relation to their language but to their "doctrines," and using teleology to organize the materials as part of the process by which a science moved from error to truth. All of this was to be quickly absorbed and widely disseminated as historiography by one of Ricardo's most faithful acolytes, McCulloch.

3. McCulloch: Doctrinal History as an Instrument of Propagation

McCulloch reviewed Ricardo's *Principles* at length in the *Edinburgh Review*. It was a glowing account that praised Ricardo for reassessing the "fundamental principles on which the science of Political Economy rests," moving the field forward more than anyone since Smith ([McCulloch] [1818] 2003, I:74). A key feature of McCulloch's review was the straightforwardness with which he asserted Ricardo's supersession of Smith, using such phrases as "It is by this principle, of which Dr Smith was not aware, that we are enabled satisfactorily to account for the low rate of profit"; "This opinion [of Smith], however, is altogether erroneous"; "Had Dr Smith been acquainted with the real nature of rent" ([McCulloch] [1818] 2003, I:91, 92, 94). Smith, in other words, had given the science a shaky start.

This treatment was repeated in McCulloch's article on "Political Economy" (1824) for the supplement to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Indeed, upon learning that McCulloch was slated to compose this piece and detail the state of the field, Malthus wrote two letters to the editor, Macvey Napier, warning that Ricardo's system was still being scrutinized and, in his opinion, was similar to the system of the French Economists: It enchanted through its simplicity, drawing "into its vortex a great number of very clever men" (Napier [1821] 1879, 31). Once made aware of Malthus's intervention, McCulloch wrote to Napier to insist that it was appropriate to articulate Ricardo's theories because they were both "new" and "correct" (Napier [1821] 1879, 31). McCulloch prevailed and wrote the piece.

Malthus was unwilling to allow this account of the state of political economy to go uncontested, prompting him to write his own counter-history in the course of reviewing McCulloch's article for the *Quarterly Review*, where Malthus claimed that McCulloch's allegiance to the "school which he represents" led him "to have altered the theories of Adam Smith" and introduced error into the science in consequence (Malthus [1824] 1986, 7:258). The significance of this episode is that, while these accounts of political economy's development were opposed on the status of Ricardo, they marched in

lockstep when it came to how that history should be written. Moreover, McCulloch's development of this genre in his later publications, above all, *The Literature of Political Economy* (1845), solidified the template that he and Malthus had shared. This process is described in what follows.

McCulloch's mini-history of political economy was organized under the titles "Rise of the Science in Modern Europe," "Progress of Commercial Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," "System of M. Quesnay and the French Economists," and "Publication of the 'Wealth of Nations'" (1824, 216). In treating the arguments of (Ricardian) political economy as constituting a science that was true, McCulloch needed to account for why the field was so young in comparison to other domains of veridiction such as medicine and astronomy. His explanation posited stifling elements in both the material and intellectual contexts of the ancient and mediaeval worlds. In particular, Ancient Greece and Rome had no knowledge of landlord-tenant relationships, and they considered many of the modern world's professions to be degrading, factors that precluded the development of theories of rent and wages.

Equally inhibiting was the ancient world's prejudices against luxury, inherited by Europe's universities in the post-Roman period. As a result, the "prejudices against commerce, manufactures, and luxury, generated in antiquity, had a powerful influence in the middle ages" and it was "was impossible that Political Economy could become an object of attention, to men imbued with such prejudices" (McCulloch 1824, 219). This style of argument should also be familiar to historians of economic thought: historical circumstances are routinely said to play an enabling or limiting role when it comes to the "discovery" of truths that are supposedly timeless, only waiting for an adequate statement to be formed in words.

This conception of the relationship between the world of ideas and the world of action provided for an easy explanation of the rise of political economy: the decline of baronial power and the rise of trade in the towns provided new phenomena for reflection in the realm of ideas.[17] This reflection initially took the form of "Mercantile Theory" of the type articulated by merchants, such as Thomas Mun's *England's Treasure by Forraign Trade* (1664) (McCulloch 1824, 221). Scattered observations and claims of this type were superseded by the work of Child, North, Locke, and other writers whom we must recognize as having "risen above the prejudices of their contemporaries" to become "founders of the modern theory of commerce" (McCulloch 1824, 224). This supposed correlation between the material world and the ideas and theories that reflect it was a

[17] Karl Marx read this piece by McCulloch in French as part of his focused reading of political economy in 1844, having already seen what Engels did with the same text in 1843: see Keith Tribe (2015, 184–85, 196).

trope that would be extended by historians later in the nineteenth century who would postulate an "industrial revolution" that represented the material reality reflected in the political economy of Ricardo, as per Arnold Toynbee, as we will see. McCulloch's narrative continued through the eighteenth century, naming Jacob Vanderlint, David Hume, Matthew Decker, Joseph Harris, and Francois Quesnay as the first to set out "with the intention of ascertaining the fundamental principles of Political Economy" (1824, 230).

This account is, of course, an unacknowledged variation on Smith's account of Europe's history in Book III and of rival systems of political economy in Book IV. Yet McCulloch added to it new names, including the Italian Pietro Verri, whom he treated as having surpassed the Economists (1824, 232–33). McCulloch also advanced beyond Smith by including him within his history, thus shifting the yardstick for measuring the thought of the past forward in time. This, too, is an enduring feature of doctrinal historiography.

On McCulloch's account, Smith was the new Newton, with the *Wealth of Nations* doing for political economy what the *Principia* had done for physics, placing "fundamental principles" beyond dispute, including the doctrine that labor is the only source of wealth (1824, 233). It should be noted that here we have a key moment in the historiographical conversion of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* from a work of political œconomy into a text of principles, the pursuit of "principles" in fact being alien to Smith's enterprise (Tribe 2021). Nevertheless, Smith's work was flawed because he did not always reason from his own principles in the correct manner. Tidying up these infelicities was the work for future generations. This was the moment for Ricardo's entry into McCulloch's narrative as the inheritor and corrector of Smith's system. Thus we read that Smith was wrong to treat rent as a component part of price, which Malthus and Ricardo and West disproved. Ricardo did it better than the others because he "stripped it [the doctrine] of the errors by which it had been encumbered, and has shown its vast importance to a right understanding of the laws which regulate the rise and fall of profits" (1824, 258), thereby reproducing the treatment of Smith that Ricardo had earlier developed in his *Principles*.

More important, however, was that McCulloch repeated Ricardo's attack on Smith for privileging agriculture because it supported the largest quantity of productive labor thanks to the fact that "nature" labored for free. McCulloch started by repeating Smith's typology of capital employments, without quoting the source material, then noted Smith's claim that capital in agriculture was the most beneficial to national wealth. The passage from Smith is quoted at length and described as "the most objectionable passage in the *Wealth of Nations*; and it is really astonishing how so acute and sagacious

a reasoner as Dr Smith could have maintained a doctrine so manifestly erroneous" (McCulloch 1824, 249). Although McCulloch conceded that nature helped in agriculture, he insisted that so did the water and wind, steam and fermentation, and other natural agents, concluding that "[s]o far, indeed, from its being true that nature does much for man in agriculture, and nothing in manufactures, that the fact is nearly the reverse" (1824, 250), repeating the arguments of Ricardo and Brougham. Having demoted the role of nature's fecundity, McCulloch emphasized the function of labor and capital by humans, treating the true test for public benefit as not the quantity of productive labor supported but the rate of profit (1824, 253).

McCulloch's approach can, accordingly, be understood as a mature version of doctrinal history. He was able to disseminate this history through his article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, control of political economy reviewing in the *Edinburgh Review* (after 1818), and his prolific publishing of diverse materials, including multiple editions of *Wealth of Nations*, with the first appearing in 1828 in four volumes, followed by a one-volume, two-column edition in 1839. The four-volume edition included a version of McCulloch's doctrinal history of political economy, again beginning with the Greeks, and his notes that explained how political economy had advanced beyond Smith, concentrating on the first two books where Smith's analytical material was concentrated. In taking this approach, McCulloch was perfectly in step with the attitude of Playfair and Buchanan, previous editors of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Tribe 2002, 37–39). In other words, no scholarly edition of *Wealth of Nations* was available to act as a contrast to doctrinal history, and the text had been disconnected from Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and caught in polemical eddies very soon after Smith's death in 1790 (Rothschild 1992).

Equally significant as a channel for disseminating doctrinal history was McCulloch's teaching in multiple settings in the 1820s. These included the Ricardo Memorial Lectures, delivered to a distinguished audience in London, the Liverpool Royal Institution, and the City of London Literary and Scientific Institution (O'Brien 1970, 45–54). The pedagogical enterprise began with private classes in Edinburgh in 1820, where he charged £10 per student, over £1000 today. He set *Wealth of Nations* as his text but presented Ricardo as the leading thinker. In the winter of 1822, McCulloch changed his medium to public lectures supplemented by private classes, sending drafts of the lectures to Ricardo, in a letter to whom McCulloch had earlier described his aim as "disseminating the sound principles of the science and to make a little money without a great deal of trouble" ([1821] 1951–73, 9:134). The last time that McCulloch offered these Edinburgh classes was the winter of 1826–27 as, in 1828, he found a more prestigious institutional setting, the chair of political economy at University of London in 1828.

Evidence regarding the content of these classes can be taken from McCulloch's own account of his Edinburgh lectures in the last pages of the 1825 second edition of his *Encyclopaedia* article. McCulloch described his "conversational classes" as examining the same topic covered in each week's lecture, proceeding as follows:

> The pupils having previously read such portions of some popular work as treat of the subject of a conversation, I examine them, to ascertain whether they have a clear apprehension of the doctrine laid down by the author: If this doctrine be either erroneous in principle or defective in statement, I tell them so [. . .] Having in this way made them thoroughly masters of what I conceive to be the true theory of the subject under discussion, I desire them to state such difficulties as may occur to them in respect to it. (1825, 115–16)

Once doctrines were mastered in this way, McCulloch explained, students wrote them down as short statements in order to help commit them to memory. The final task was to apply these doctrines to particular cases, a skill possessed by the "able and expert economist" (1825, 116). This is why McCulloch felt free to include extracts of doctrines in the appendices that he added to his article, in the same manner as Lauderdale. Thus, for example, McCulloch took the opportunity of diminishing Malthus's contribution by extracting a passage, untranslated, from M. Herbert, who apparently articulated the "true doctrine of population" in 1753, in his *Essai sur la Police de Grains* (*Essay on the Regulation of Corn*) (1825, 123–24). Here we see that the function of doctrinal history was to form expertise in students via the repetition and elaboration of doctrines; the texts from which these doctrines were extracted were not an object of concern, and even less an object of philological and bibliographical study, since this was not a goal of doctrinal history.

If the evidence presented so far provides an overall impression of doctrinal history as primarily being used as a pedagogical technique, then the best candidate for the moment that it jumped the barrier and began presenting itself as historiography was the publication of McCulloch's ground-breaking *The Literature of Political Economy: A Classified Catalogue of a Select Publications in the Different Departments of that Science, With Historical, Critical, and Biographical Notices* (1845). This book established a template for histories of economic thought that has survived into the present. Two characteristics can be emphasized.

First, McCulloch's history asserted a threshold moment in the middle of the eighteenth century in which the diverse topics included in political economy—such as money, rent, and wages—were finally treated in a unified and scientific manner. This

is why the first chapter began with those texts that met this threshold, "Treatises on Political Economy in General, Or on Some of its Fundamental Principles." Pride of place was given to Smith and Ricardo for moving the science forward, just as the curriculum is organized today.

Second, and in consequence, McCulloch's history presupposed that political economy was defined by the principles of production and distribution that had come to be apprehended with increasing accuracy. This permitted a retrospective account of the process of their discovery: the errors of the mercantile system were displaced by the Economists, then Smith, then Ricardo, whose bright light caused Smith's *Wealth of Nations* to show its age, finally being put to rest later in the century when Walter Bagehot wrote that *Wealth of Nations* was "dropping out of immediate use from change of times" (Bagehot 1876, 37).

4. After McCulloch: The Continuation and Insulation of British Doctrinal History

The account above suggests that doctrinal history was both a means of transmitting intellectual expertise to students and a mode for propagating doctrinal claims developed by those who conceived political economy to be a progressive science approaching ever closer to the truth. Accordingly, the doctrinal historian was not obliged to seek neutrality with respect to the truth claims of the material that they studied because they were already armed with the benefit of hindsight. In consequence, the doctrinal historian tended not to locate the texts under study in relation to the linguistic contexts in which they were produced. All of this, it is hoped, is familiar: Today's textbooks on the history of economic thought use a version of McCulloch's periodization in which the field is nearly barren before the mercantile system, which was confused, naturally giving way to something closer to the truth from Smith onwards. In English-language scholarship, we began retrospectively calling this period following Smith "classical political economy" around the turn of the twentieth century. It is difficult to find a British textbook that offers an alternative to this schema.[18]

Seen in this perspective, what is remarkable is the insulation of doctrinal history since its origins in the 1800s from the rival document- and language-based historiography seen above in the work of Porson and Marsh, which grew out of Renaissance humanism and that, in the early nineteenth century, was far more prestigious owing to its institutional anchorage in universities since the seventeenth century. This alternative mode of writing history was not primarily interested in systems, theories, or ideas because its quarry was instead texts and the language in which they were written, for

[18] An important exception is Backhouse and Tribe (2017).

it was mastery of archaic language that allowed the humanists and their successors to detect when a text was a forgery or contained corruptions because its *language* was demonstrably anachronistic (Grafton 1991). In the case of Cambridge and Oxford, the rise of historical learning occurred late in the seventeenth century, following the Restoration (1660), with large investment in professorships, university presses, and collections of original manuscripts facilitating the field's rapid development (Levitin 2019, 67–74). Porson and Marsh were, accordingly, standing on an iceberg while McCulloch travelled in a vessel of his own making.

Porson's and Marsh's style of historiography could not afford to proceed in the manner of doctrinal history—assimilating earlier texts to contemporary ways of thinking by finding anticipations of abstract doctrines inside them—because reading texts in such a fashion would corrupt the evidence on which the historian was to rely, namely, the *literal language* of the text. The development of the history of political economy in the later nineteenth century was not towards this existing style but to a new focus—to the character of the industrial and commercial life out of which texts of political economy were taken to grow.

Arnold Toynbee's influential version of this bi-level approach to ideas and the world is found in his posthumously published *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century in England* (1884). The villain of Toynbee's story was Ricardo, whom he treated as reflecting, in thought, the material conditions of the world in which he lived.

> Adam Smith lived on the eve of an industrial revolution. Ricardo lived in the midst of it. Assumptions which could never have occurred to Adam Smith, because foreign to the quiet world he lived in, a world of restrictions and scarcely perceptible industrial movement, occurred to Ricardo almost as a matter of course. (Toynbee, 1884, 5)

Toynbee proclaimed his approach as aiding the study of political economy's history because "[a]bstract propositions" became clearer when viewed alongside the "facts which were before the writer at the time" (1884, 28). The effect of Toynbee's ambition to relate ideas and the world was to foreclose textual scholarship because this history also worked with the conjectured referents of doctrinal history—ideas, principles, theories, doctrines, and so on. It might also be added that there is little evidence that Toynbee actually read Ricardo's work (Tribe 2022a, 205–06).

With historical reflection developing in this direction, a rival, text-critical and language-based style of scholarship on the history of political economy seems not to have existed in Britain before Edwin Cannan's work in the 1890s. In the Preface to *A*

History of Theories of Production and Distribution in English Political Economy, from 1776 to 1848 (1894), Cannan wrote that in approaching his material with a "historical spirit" he was hardly helped by previous writers because of their commitment to "abstract theory," which led to the "creation of a mythical Ricardo and Malthus" (1894, v–vi). In forging this new historical approach based on the meticulous citation of sources and attention to their language, Cannan was fusing two approaches: presuming that theories and doctrines were a timeless object of study, but examining their linguistic expression with the classicist's meticulousness. He was rewarded by being rejected for publication by Macmillan, eventually publishing the text with Rivington, Percival & Co., and enjoying poor sales (Tribe 2008, 516).

Cannan's more successful intervention followed a piece of good luck: he happened to meet someone in possession of a set of student notes from Adam Smith's lectures taken by his students in his public class on jurisprudence before *Wealth of Nations* was published in 1776. Cannan produced a scholarly edition of these notes under the title, *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms* (1896). Cannan noted all parallel passages in *Wealth of Nations* along with the likely sources that Smith used when preparing his lectures, identifying Smith's adaptation of Samuel Pufendorf and Francis Hutcheson. The effect was revolutionary: The lecture notes made it possible to reconnect *Wealth of Nations* with Smith's natural jurisprudence and its first outgrowth, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Tribe 2002, 45–47).

The uniqueness of Cannan's text was immediately noted by reviewers, most forcefully by Charles Francis Bastable, Chair of Political Economy at Trinity College, who highlighted the proximity of Cannan's techniques to those used "for a Greek or Latin text [. . .] Nothing, in fact, is too small for notice if it in any way explains the text or helps to elucidate Adam Smith's relation to European, and especially to English thought" (1898, 201–02). Having explained how the *Lectures* diminished the plausible influence of the Economists on Smith, Bastable then drew out the companion finding regarding the role of natural law:

> A final impression that the study of the Lectures leaves on the mind is the descent of the whole body of modern political and economic speculation from the 17th-century system of natural law (or *jus gentium*), itself the product of reflection on the Roman law, in the shape that it was presented by its latest commentators. It is a commonplace since the publication of Maine's *Ancient Law*, that the Grotian system was connected by an irregular filiation with Roman law. Hobbes, Locke, Smith, and even Hume were profoundly affected by this form of thought. We can see how much the classification and exposition in the *Lectures* owe to the terminology and

> arrangement of the Civil Law. The conditions of modern society have indeed helped to shape, and have supplied the materials for, both Politics and Economics; but both sciences owe their existence to the earlier and less definite system of *Jus gentium*, or natural law. (Bastable 1898, 211; original italics)

What was to be the fate of this account of Smith the natural jurist in British historiography? It should be marked that it was not the result of a program of source-based Smith research that had institutional support in the manner of Classics or Theology. Instead, it was a product of chance. Its fortunes would hinge on its absorption or rejection by doctrinal historians, a point not lost on foreign observers such as August Oncken. He was a correspondent of the British Economic Association in Switzerland and a participant in German-language debates about Smith that had been occurring in Germany since the 1850s (Oncken 1877).[19] He pleaded for his English colleagues to grasp the opportunity to recover the historical Smith that he saw Cannan's publication of the *Lectures* as having presented to them:

> Through the discovery of the mere notes of these lectures we are at last in a position to do full justice to the noble structure of ideas in the mind of the great Scotchman [. . .] It would be a graceful act for the English political economists to set themselves the task of inquiring fully into the Smith problem, and thus to protect their great master once for all from detraction, by presenting his teaching in its entirety, as a system of Moral Philosophy, in which Political Economy forms but a part. (Oncken 1897, 449)

The "task" was not set, and doctrinal historiography continued with its own methods and findings, enjoying institutional support from journals such as *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (established 1886) and *Economic Journal* (established 1891). The emergence of such reputable academic journals as outlets for doctrinal history written by economists is an important institutional development to note because it removed the field's dependency on a self-starter such as McCulloch and his pioneering collection *Literature of Political Economy*, moving the enterprise from the vagaries of the public sphere to the certainty of tenured economists and their professional journals, another feature that has continued until today.

If we take the very first issue of the *Economic Journal* as an example, then one finds the following article, "The Progress of Economic Doctrine in England in the Eighteenth Century," by William Cunningham, then Tooke Professor of Economics and Statistics at King's College, London. The article's title is as good a signal as to its contents as the first

[19] For the best overview of this terrain see Tribe (2008).

line: "By universal consent Adam Smith stands out as the founder of modern political economy. He so entirely recast it that the ordinary student of economic doctrine is satisfied to trace the progress from his time" (Cunningham 1891, 73). Cunningham then filled out the pre-Smith history of the field with names that McCulloch had discussed in his *Literature of Political Economy*, starting with the pioneering William Petty and finishing with the desultory Sir James Steuart.

Under these conditions, Cannan's discovery of Smith the jurist in the 1890s was not integrated in a lasting way into the history of economic thought. This can be seen by examining what passed for an account of Smith in a history of economic thought textbook in the 1930s. Alexander Gray was appointed to the Jaffrey Chair of Political Economy in Aberdeen in 1921, and in his *The Development of Economic Doctrine* (1933, 124) Gray wrote of Smith's belief in "a natural order," and suggested that "something may be allowed to his teacher, Hutcheson, in his emphasis on what is 'natural'," an amazing compression into one line of Cannan's research on this point. Gray then moved on with his main exegesis of the division of labor, productive and unproductive labor, and the other topics of Books I and II of *Wealth of Nations*; the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Lectures* play no role in his account. A similar picture is found in Eric Roll's *A History of Economic Thought* (1938), published when he was Professor of Economics and Commerce at University College of Hull. Roll similarly flattened Smith's inheritance of natural law jurisprudence to belief in a "natural order" that led him to "apply the principles of Naturalism to economic policy" (1938, 149–50). Another tremendous contraction of Cannan's researches.

The relationship between doctrinal history and language-based accounts of Smith arose again because of the new history of political thought that developed in the 1970s and 1980s. This field was undertaking a so-called "historical turn," switching from its own focus on doctrines to questions of language. This development is readily identified with the "Cambridge school" of intellectual history (for an early self-portrait, see Pocock 1971, 3–41; more recently, see James 2019, 83–98). The meeting of the two sub-fields might be dated to J. G. A. Pocock's magnum opus *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), which presented Smith as combating old European fears about the effects that commerce had on virtue by modifying the meaning of virtue, and by employing the language of natural law to provide a rival account of the polity (Pocock 1975; 1985). This provisional argument was then affirmed and extended by Donald Winch (Winch 1978; Haakonssen 1981; Hont and Ignatieff 1983, 1–44). As Donald Winch's research and its reception by historians of economic thought shows, this wave of text-based scholarship perturbed the field but did not transform it (Winch 2009). This point will be revisited in the concluding comments.

The other impetus for the British history of economic thought to be conducted in relation to language has, understandably, had a German flavor, coming from Keith Tribe. In his mature work, Tribe has advanced a "broadly philological" approach that amounts to the claim that "in studying economics, we should pay attention to the language of economics" (2015, 297). Despite writing his PhD thesis at Cambridge in the 1970s, when the "Cambridge school" was supposedly in its early stages, Tribe did not draw his resources from there but from the concern with discontinuity characteristic of Michel Foucault and Gaston Bachelard (Tribe 1978, 5–23). This approach was then inflected by exposure to *Begriffsgeschichte*, closely associated with Reinhart Koselleck, after visiting the University of Heidelberg and the Max Planck Institute (Göttingen) in the 1980s.[20] Encountering this style of inquiry in the 1980s, Tribe used it to inflect his concern with change in economic discourse, producing two book-length studies of German economic thought (Tribe 1988; 1995). Tellingly, Tribe's position teaching economics at Keele University was a sideways movement from sociology that was only possible because of a series of contingencies that included the institution's perilous finances; Tribe was not originally hired as an economist and, unwilling to teach by textbook, soon left the field to become a translator.[21]

Conclusion

The key finding of this paper can be stated as follows: the dominant form that British economists have deployed to acquire knowledge of their discipline's past has been doctrinal history. It was first developed in a sustained fashion and with institutional support by Dugald Stewart to serve a pedagogical function. But, construing predecessors and rivals in terms of doctrines was also found to be convenient for pursuing intellectual dominance and propagation by David Ricardo. This combative use was then adopted by the person who gave the doctrinal history of political economy its most serious statement at mid-century, J. R McCulloch, who sided with Ricardo in his argument with Malthus over Smith's pedigree while producing a comprehensive history in progressive mode. The defining characteristic is that this genre combined two elements simultaneously: historiography and theory. Further research should examine whether this pattern were repeated in other national contexts where the traditions of historiography and academic organization are different.[22]

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[20] For Koselleck's reflections on historical method in English see Koselleck (2002).

[21] Tribe, correspondence with the author, October 22, 2022.

[22] One obvious first port of call is Germany, where the prospect of a Historical School shaped the reception history of Ricardo's works. See Tribe (1995, ch 10).

Yet there is *prima facie* evidence of the widespread transmission of doctrinal history to non-British contexts, namely: The prevalence of interpretive clashes that fit the Malthus–McCulloch template, exhibiting irresolvable conflict regarding the nature of past thinkers' doctrines and the present-day system to which they supposedly point. A current example is debate over Ricardo's supposed "discovery" of the principle of comparative advantage amidst a list of other contenders including Adam Smith, James Mill, and Robert Torrens. In fact, the debate has been carried on intermittently since Robert Torrens claimed in the third edition of *An Essay on the External Corn Trade* (1826, vii) that his "principles" regarding "comparative advantage" and "comparative disadvantage"—first published in 1815—were adopted by Ricardo in his *Principles* of 1817, a claim that was revitalized by Edwin Seligman and Jacob Hollander (1911).[23] Such conflict is a predictable by-product of a style of historiography that relates to its intellectual materials in terms of up-to-date statements of a progressive science because belief in truth's progress makes it possible to project its "discovery."

For historiography of the type produced by the document- and language-based historiography that grew out of Renaissance humanism, by contrast, questions concerning the "discovery" of a theorem are simply not questions that can exist. For the historian of language may not take "theorems" that exist in a conceptual realm before their articulation in texts as an object of study: They fall outside what may be known through linguistic evidence. Instead, there is only language use and argumentation, and it is only disclosed in texts and their reception histories, both of which are assumed to answer to contingency alone, not to theoretical reason or scientific progress. Put differently, the historian who is oriented to text and language does not hold views regarding the truth or otherwise of any system or theorem but merely studies historical specimens of language. There are two reasons for this abstemious stance. First, because language is evidence of what Herbert Marsh termed "the sentiments and modes of thinking, which prevailed" (Marsh 1792, 10). Second, because to subscribe to a system or theorem as true is to endanger historiography by writing it with what Marsh called "a system already adopted" (1792, 8). Historians, in other words, may not be economists when they write history.

Here the distance between the two styles of historiography becomes large and maps directly onto the distance between economics and history departments today. For economists teaching economics in university classrooms will usually feel constrained to teach their students to relate to fundamental theory as true and not simply as an example of language use, while the historian *can* dispense their duty by limiting their

[23] For recent contributions, see Faccarello (2022) and Gaul (2021).

instruction to this minimalist task. Viewing this awkward fact with clear eyes might clarify some characteristics of the field.

First, as the above example suggests, historians of economic thought have spent enormous energy litigating debates such as Smith's and Ricardo's intellectual pedigrees and the discovery of comparative advantage that, from the point of view of text-based scholarship, concern phenomena beyond what can be known using historiographical evidence and hence never ought to have been debated. Second, remembering the pedagogical services that doctrinal history has played for economics can clarify the difficulties involved in changing the type of history that economists produce.

Here it is worth recalling Margaret Schabas's influential piece that made the case for the history of economics to "break away" from economics and join the history of science. Schabas's challenge was for economist-historians to accept that economics had "lost the means to think historically"—except for "Whiggish" history of a progressive kind—and then consider publishing in "standard history or history of science journals" or using "less mathematics in order to reach a more literary-orientated audience" even if this meant forsaking "the approval of economists" (Schabas 1992, 196, 197, 200). From the point of view of the argument here, Schabas's call was doubly naïve. First, it ignored the fact that economist-historians have been trained in a style of historiography that makes it difficult for them to meet the threshold for publication in history journals because of their approach to primary texts as stores of doctrine, theory, and so on. Second, economists bear professional personae that lead them to construe economics as their field (not history) and mathematics as a natural medium for a progressive science.

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