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H-France Review Vol. 18 (August 2018), No. 173

Bruce Berkowitz, *Playfair: The True Story of the British Secret Agent Who Changed How We See the World*. Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 2018. Xxiv + 477 pp. Maps, tables, figures, appendices, notes, and index. \$34.85 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781942695042.

Review by Anna Plassart, The Open University.

William Playfair is not a household name. He is probably best known for having first devised a way to represent numbers visually: he invented the graph, as well as the bar and pie charts. Historians of economic thought may know him as the man who produced the first critical edition of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) in 1805. But his name also pops up in studies of the British reception of the French Revolution: he was one of a number of Brits who spent time in Paris in the late 1780s and early 1790s, fled the Terror, and published their accounts of the revolutionary events.

Bruce Berkowitz pulls all these threads (and many more) together in the first biography dedicated to this engineer, economist, pamphleteer, businessman and philosopher, and he demonstrates that there was much more to Playfair than history books would suggest. As it turns out, Playfair also led an altogether different, and more cloak and dagger-esque life. Perhaps before all else, he was an adventurer who was seemingly involved in every major crisis to befall Great Britain, France, and the United States of America in the late eighteenth century. When he was not plotting to collapse the French currency, spying for the British government, or launching one of his many doomed business ventures, he also found time to come up with a dizzying array of innovations, ranging from metalworking patents to the theory of comparative advantage. He may well be, as Berkowitz puts it, "the most famous man you have never heard of" (p. 334).

Playfair was born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1759. In many ways, he was a classic product of the Scottish Enlightenment. His father was a Church of Scotland minister, as was his older and better-known brother, John Playfair (1748-1819), a scientist and mathematician who went on to succeed his friend Dugald Stewart as the Chair of Mathematics at the University of Edinburgh. William was apprenticed with the engineer and inventor Andrew Meikle, and spent the late 1770s in Birmingham, working for James Watt, who was developing the modern steam engine along with his partner Matthew Bolton.

Playfair soon developed and patented several inventions, and by 1781 he had set up his own company in London. In the 1780s he published a number of works on monetary policy and politics, including his *Commercial and Political Atlas* (1787), whose depiction of the balance of trade between Britain and other nations is widely acknowledged to have presented the first ever statistical graphs. His business venture having failed, Playfair moved to Paris in 1786 in search of new opportunities. The *Commercial and Political Atlas* had been read by a number of influential Frenchmen, including the king, and Playfair was soon introduced into France's scientific and aristocratic networks. He also became acquainted with the American community settled in Paris, and he struck up another ill-fated business venture with an American expatriate, Joel Barlow. Together they formed the Scioto Land Company, today infamous for having caused one of the earliest political scandals of the young American Republic. The company,

which had been explicitly or implicitly backed by such figures as Washington, Jefferson, and Hamilton, was found to have sold 150,000 acres of land to French colonists for which it had not fully possessed the deeds, leaving French settlers stranded in present-day Ohio. The company subsequently collapsed in 1790.

Playfair had been deeply unimpressed with the inefficiencies and corruption of *ancien régime* France, and he originally sympathized with the French Revolution. Like many British moderate reformists, however, he was appalled by the increasing violence of the Revolution, and soon found himself on the payroll of the British government, tasked with writing anti-Jacobin pamphlets. By 1793, he had fled France and returned to London. There, he proposed to the British government, and subsequently enacted, a new strategy for economic warfare: setting up in a paper mill near Haughton Castle in northern England, he set out to flood the French republic with counterfeit *assignats*, in an effort to collapse its currency. While it is already well known that counterfeit *assignats* were being produced on a large scale both in France and abroad, one of the book's most startling discoveries is Playfair's direct involvement in what appears to have been a huge, government-backed enterprise. By 1793 the mill would have been producing 180,000 notes per week, according to Berkowitz's calculations.

In 1797 Playfair set out on a new business venture, setting up the Original Security Bank with a view to alleviate the shortage of cash currency in Britain by issuing denomination bills backed by government securities. Unfortunately, the authorities did not see kindly to the bank, which eventually went bankrupt, like most of Playfair's business ventures. In the nineteenth century, Playfair appears to have focused on his career as a pamphleteer and journalist. These were his most prolific years, during which he produced works such as *The Statistical Breviary* (1801), a new edition of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1805), *An Inquiry into the Permanent Causes of the Decline and Fall of Powerful and Wealthy Nations* (1805), and *A Letter on Our Agricultural Distresses* (1821). But making a decent living as a writer always was difficult, and he died in poverty in 1823.

As will be clear by now, Playfair's life story is something of a rollercoaster. Rather appropriately, the book unfolds like a spy thriller—full of suspense, action and revelations at every turn. It is great fun to read. Berkowitz's conversational style comes complete with contemporary references to Forrest Gump and his readers' 401(k)s, and it is clearly angled towards American readers (to take but one example, the United Irishmen are introduced as “sort of an Irish version of the Sons of Liberty”, p. 141). But one cannot fault the author's enthusiasm for his subject, or his commitment to getting the story across as thoroughly yet as pedagogically as possible. One could wonder, however, if a casual reader may struggle to follow the thread of a narrative complicated by a huge cast of secondary and tertiary characters as well as countless expository backstories and anecdotes.

Unexpectedly, a large part of the book's entertainment value lies its detailed discussion of methodology. Weaved into this novel-worthy story is also an under-the-hood depiction of the trials, pitfalls, and joys of historical research. Berkowitz takes his reader along with him on a journey through the massive detective work he undertook, and he unravels the series of misunderstandings, copied-in errors, and assumptions that have conspired to keep Playfair out of the limelight. Step by step, the author shows how he uncovered new evidence that allowed him to piece the whole story together. It is a highly pedagogic deconstruction of the notion of historical truth and a realistic account of what it is like to conduct archival research - his depiction of the many hours spent poring over pages of Playfair's illegible handwriting (“the stuff of ophthalmology legend”, p. 345) can only arouse immediate recognition, and the deepest sympathy, in his historian readers.

While it is clear that Playfair was a prolific and inventive character, I was perhaps less convinced by some (not all) of Berkowitz's claims of deep originality and profound influence. Much more could have been made of the role and influence of Adam Smith and, beyond Smith, of the Scottish Enlightenment of which Playfair was so clearly part and parcel. Indeed, some of the ideas attributed to Playfair, such as the insight that national power lies not in territory but rather in “manufacturing, banking and trade” (p.

27), are likely to have come directly from Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Incidentally, most Smith scholars would surely disagree with the assertion that "Adam Smith could never square his idea of how incentives drive investments with his idea of 'moral sentiments'" (p. 30). The suggestion that Playfair's writings shaped Jeremy Bentham's views is also based on limited evidence, and I was not entirely convinced by the suggestion that Playfair went on to influence David Ricardo, via the assumed Bentham connection, on the very different issue of comparative advantage.

In fact, in a few cases, Playfair's supposedly ground-breaking ideas could be argued to have been rather common in the period. For example, one of the main novel insights to be found in his *Inquiry into the Permanent Causes of the Decline and Fall of Powerful and Wealthy Nations*, according to Berkowitz, is the fact "that one could even make a theory about the rise and fall of nations. There weren't many theories about anything in the early nineteenth century, or at least not as we understand theories today: logical explanations based on assumptions, supported by observation" (p. 267). This statement is debatable. I would contend that theories about the rise and fall of nations had been rife in both the French and Scottish Enlightenment at least since Montesquieu's writings. In Scotland only, look no further than John Playfair's colleagues at Edinburgh: Adam Ferguson had published his widely read *Essay on the History of Civil Society* in 1767, and Dugald Stewart, who knew William Playfair, had theorized "conjectural history" in his 1793 *Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith*.<sup>[1]</sup>

These last points, however, are largely quibbles. They should not distract from what is, by any measure, an impressive scholarly achievement based on what can only be years of painstaking research in French, British, and American archives. Berkowitz has not only rescued Playfair from the margins of history, he has established him as an important and innovative writer, and as a man closely involved in the British government's underground efforts to destabilize the French Revolution. And what's more, he makes it all sound a whole lot of fun.

#### NOTES

[1] Dugald Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith LL.D," in *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. William Hamilton, 10 vols. (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable & Co., 1858), vol. 10, pp. 3-98, quotation on p. 34.

Anna Plassart  
The Open University  
[anna.plassart@open.ac.uk](mailto:anna.plassart@open.ac.uk)

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