

Jeremy Bentham, James Anderson and practical economic development

Jeremy Bentham conducted an extensive correspondence with James Anderson, the famous Scottish agricultural economist of the late 18th century, but the correspondence has not been noticed in any extant study. While Bentham scholars may find Anderson a tangential figure, it is surprising that economists have not given any attention to this exchange. Anderson is known to economists largely for his devastating critique of Adam Smith's views on Rent, which he accomplished by developing what subsequently came to be called the Ricardian model of Rent. Bentham had such a high opinion of Anderson that he wanted to send Anderson to Russia to help Samuel Bentham with his entrepreneurial efforts. The correspondence covers not only large questions of policy but also a variety of minutiae. No stone which could increase output was to be left unturned. Bentham even urged Anderson to prepare a paper on the Scots poor for the benefit of Lord Shelburne. Their correspondence indicates a very different style of economic thinking than that made famous by Adam Smith, who used very general categories to treat of economic policy and never considered the detail of practical policies---one indication being his aloofness from all questions dealing with the poor in the Scottish Highlands. Anderson, on the other hand, was a practical farmer for many years, invented the Scotch plough, dabbled in Chemistry, and studied animal behavior with such acuteness as to draw the attention of Charles Darwin. Bentham was thoroughly appreciative of Anderson's merits and praised Anderson's works in several of his writings. It shows the range of Bentham's mind that he was equally at home commenting upon Adam Smith and the general rate of usury as he was in considering the variety of potato to be sent to Russia. A study of the correspondence, interpreted in the light of Bentham's own travels as well as Samuel Bentham's experiences in Russia, give us a more rounded view of intellectual life in the 1790's because it will shed light both upon Bentham's wide reading and interests as well as upon the 'hands-on', practical bent of many Scots at this time.

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