

The Man Who Built the Castle

GRACING THE NATIONAL Mall in Washington, D.C., with several splendid buildings, the Smithsonian Institution is a huge tourist attraction, a repository of art and culture, and a pioneering center of scientific research. As is well known, this singular American institution, encompassing 19 museums and nine research centers, came about because of a quirk in the will of an Englishman who gallivanted around Europe all his life but never crossed the Atlantic. Luckily for us, the man born Jacques Louis Macie changed his name in midlife to James Smithson, hoping to gain an ounce more respect in the salons of London and Paris. It would have been hard to turn "Macie" into a mellifluous name to etch into stone.

Architectural historian Heather Ewing cannot be faulted for failing to summon a full

THE LOST WORLD OF JAMES SMITHSON:

Science, Revolution, and the Birth of the Smithsonian.

By Heather Ewing.
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Englishman James Smithson, shown here in 1816, never set foot in the United States, but it was his fortune that created America's ultimate museum piece, the Smithsonian Institution.

portrait of the man. A disastrous 1865 fire at the Smithsonian destroyed Smithson's letters and notes along with his scientific collections. Scouring libraries and private collections throughout Europe, Ewing has made a remarkable effort to gather up what documentary evidence remains of his existence.

Macie was born in Paris in 1764 or 1765 to Elizabeth Macie, mistress to Hugh Smithson, the first Duke of Northumberland. When, at about age 35, he changed his name to Smithson, he was only making official a parent-age that was already widely known. He never met his father.

Smithson had a passion for science, and by age 22 was a fellow of the Royal Society of London. It didn't hurt that he was well connected and well off, though the origin of that wealth never becomes clear in Ewing's account. Taking life as an extended grand tour, Smithson popped up over the years in Germany, Italy, and Denmark, as well as England and France.

Unable to say much about the man himself, Ewing instead gives a rich account of the origins of the Royal Society and the rise of chemistry, fashionable society in the capital cities and tourist resorts of Europe, and the chaos that enveloped France during the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras.

Against this ornate background the enigmatic Smithson flits back and forth. He traveled to Paris in 1788, for example, with a letter of introduction from the botanist Sir Joseph Banks to the chemist Antoine Lavoisier, whose scientific importance and grisly demise on the guillotine Ewing duly recounts. Did Smithson actually meet Lavoisier? We can't be sure. Judging by his brief appearances in the letters and diaries of such notables, Smithson was a charming, well-liked man, and a clever but hardly profound

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scientist, publishing mainly on chemistry and mineralogy.

Ewing makes a slender case that Smithson saw in the American and French revolutions the promise of a fresh, utopian future—until the blood began to flow in Paris, leaving the United States the sole unblemished example of a new society, free of the snobbery and condescension of the old. Upon his death in 1829, he bequeathed a good living to his nephew and the bulk of his fortune to that nephew's issue. When the nephew died, childless, in 1835, a proviso in Smithson's will sent roughly £100,000 (about \$510,000) "to the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase & diffusion of knowledge among men."

Some proud Americans declared that their country should refuse this Old World largesse. When the money finally did reach Washington, bickering ensued over what sort of establishment it should support. Not until 1846 did Congress charter the Smithsonian; the cornerstone of its castle home, which symbolizes the institution to this day, was laid the following year.

If Ewing can't turn Smithson into a substantial character or explain precisely why he left his famous legacy, she is nonetheless persuasive that the bequest wasn't merely whimsical, as popular legend sometimes has it. Smithson was a true scientific enthusiast, and something of an idealist. He would be happy with the institution that bears his name.

—David Lindley

Making Sense of It All

TO THE MODERN MIND, THE verb "compute" signifies a murky electronic process—blinking lights, the hum of a processor, possibly the scrolling of digits across a screen. But before the 20th century

GLUT:
Mastering
Information
Through the Ages.

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the word had a very different connotation, namely, to count, reckon, or impose order on information. Alex Wright, an information architect and former Harvard librarian, argues that we've outsourced so much processing, storing, and retrieving of information to machines that we've come to see information technologies as mysterious, thoroughly modern innovations. In *Glut*, he sets out to show that if we resist the tendency of the technorati to look only into the future, we can see that we've been in an information age of sorts all along.

Inventions such as Sumerian tablet writing in the third millennium BC and the Phoenician alphabet in approximately the 10th century BC testify to humankind's innate ability to organize data. The original purpose of the familial order of the Greek Pantheon (Cronus begat Zeus, who begat Athena) was not to imbue stories with familial drama but to help orators recall the sequential details of their epics. Exotic accounting tools such as the Incan quipu—long pieces of intricately knotted rope—were once thought to be simple ledgers; new evidence suggests that they served as historical chronicles as well, and perhaps even stored gossip.

Wright, an information systems theorist, holds that all social schemes—from bee colonies to stock exchanges—share certain observable characteristics in how they create and disseminate data. Such systems branch from a single source (a hierarchy) or bubble up spontaneously (a network). A hierarchy involves individual elements grouped into categories that, in turn, fall into broader categories. Aristotle's taxonomy of flora and fauna, which classified animals according to their medium of locomotion (i.e., water, air, land), is the quintessential hierarchy. A computer pull-down menu is another example. Networks, on the other hand, follow no single pattern. French philosopher Denis Diderot's 18th-century *Encyclopédie* featured the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau alongside bits