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Adam Smith, the sensible philosopher

Of all the great teachers of mankind, can any have lived a duller life than Adam Smith? Between his birth in 1723 and his death in 1790, he seems to have done nothing but read, lecture, travel once to Europe as tutor to a young duke, work as a customs commissioner, and (of course) write.

Nor did he leave behind a record of a particularly interesting personality. His books occasionally glint with wry wit, but Smith himself seems to have been a singularly unamusing man. As a young schoolteacher in Smith's home village of Kirkcaldy, Thomas Carlyle—not exactly a barrel of laughs himself—complained of a dinner given in honor of the birthday of the wife of Smith's aristocratic pupil: "The Fare was Sumptuous, but the Company was formal and Dull. Adam Smith their only Familiar at Table, was but ill qualifi'd to promote the Jollity of a Birthday ..." Carlyle's assessment was echoed even b ...

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