Biography of Sir William Petty

Dates of Birth and Death:
(∗) 27 May 1623 in Romsey, Hampshire, England
(†) 16 December 1687 in London, England

Family Data:
William Petty was born into a family having a middle income. His father Anthony Petty was tailor, his parents died early on.

In 1667, William Petty married Elizabeth Waller (ca. 1636-1708), who was made suo jure Baroness Shelburne (on 13 December 1688) for lifetime. They had three surviving children: Charles Petty, 1st Baron Shelburne (1672-1696), Henry Shelburne, 1st Earl of Shelburne (1675-1751), Anne Petty (1677-1737), married to Thomas FitzMaurice, 1st Earl of Kerry.

Education:
Already at his age of 12, Petty was an able smith, clockmaker and joiner. In 1637, he became a cabin boy. After a ship-wreck, he landed in Normandy and started his studies at the College of the Jesuits in Caen, where he learned Latin, Greek, French, Mathematics and Astronomy at his age of 14. He returned to England after one year.

Professional Career:
During the first English civil war, Petty escaped to the Netherlands, where he studied anatomy. In Amsterdam, he became private secretary of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and met René Descartes (1596-1650), Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) and Marin de Mersenne (1588-1648).

In 1646, he returned to England and studied medicine in Oxford; in 1651 he became a professor for Anatomy at Brasenose College in Oxford and for Music in London. In 1651, he joined Oliver Cromwell as a army doctor in Ireland. He dealt with the new understanding of science developed by Francis Bacon. In 1654, he made a land-register of the whole of Ireland, the so-called Down Survey, which was finished in 1656. Cromwell used it to indemnify his creditors with land. Petty obtained a piece of land as well and the high sum of 9000 livres for that, which gave him the bad reputation of bribery.

Also during the restoration under Charles II and James II, he was treated well, but lost a part of his property. His election into the parliament failed,
and in 1666, he returned to Ireland, which he tried to modernize. He then turned more to the social sciences and lost all his posts in Oxford. In 1682, he became one of the founders of the Dublin Society.

Petty developed the modern way of computing and thus became a forerunner of modern insurance business. He also made several practical inventions.

Important Publications:


- *Political Arithmetick: or discourse concerning the extent and value of lands, people, buildings...* (London 1683, repr. Hull 1899; Düsseldorf 1992, s.a. http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/petty/poliarit.htm (22.12.2008)), Another essay in political arithmetick, concerning the growth of the city of London: with the measures, periods, causes and consequences thereof 1682 (London 1683), Two essays in political arithmetick concerning the people, housing, hospitals etc. of London and Paris (London 1687), then: *Five Essays in Political Arithmetick, or a discourse concerning the extent and value of lands, people, buildings...* (London 1687, 1690; Düsseldorf 1992), then: *Political arithmetick, or discourse concerning the extent and value of lands, people, buildings, husbandry, manufacture, commerce.: as the same relates to every country in general, but more particular to the territories of His Majesty of Great Britain, and his neighbours of Holland, Zealand and France* (London 1691), new expanded edition: *An Essay concerning the multiplication of mankind: together with another essay in political arithmetick, concerning the growth of the city of London, with the measures, periods, causes, and consequences thereof, 1682* (London 1698, also Microfiche), then: *Several essays in political arithmetick: with memoirs of the author’s life* (London 1699; London 1755; London 1992; Microfiche; online

- A further assertion of the propositions concerning the magnitude &c. of London: contained in two essays in political arithmetick ... together with a vindication of the said essay of some learned persons of the French nation (Online resource Farmington Hills 2006).
  - Bertram Schefold, Political arithmetick; Vademecum; Einleitung zur “Political arithmetick” von William Petty (Düsseldorf 1992).

- A declaration concerning the newly invented art of double writing (London 1648).


- Verbum Sapienti (London 1664; Shannon 1970).

- The Political Anatomy of Ireland (London 1672; Shannon 1970).

- Quantulumcumque Concerning Money (London 1682,1695, s.a. http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/petty/money.txt (22.1.2008)).


- A treatise of Ireland. The elements of Ireland and of its Religion, Trade & Policy (1687, online http://www.taieb.net/auteurs/Petty/pastimes0.html (22.12.2008)).
• An essay concerning the multiplication of mankind: Together with another essay on political arithmetick..., 1682 (London 1686; 1698; online Ann Arbor 1999; Farmington Hills).

• A discourse of taxes and contributions: shewing the nature and measures of crownlands, assessments, customs, poll-moneys, lotteries, benevolence, penalties, monopolies, offices, taxes, tythes, hearth, excise, &c. (London 1689; online Ann Arbor 1999, sowie Farmington Hills 2006; http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/petty/taxes.txt (22.12.2008)).

• The political anatomy of Ireland (London 1691; Shannon 1970; auch als Microfiche; online Farmington Hills 2004), The economic writings, vol. 1, pp. 121-231; späterer Titel: Sir William Petty's political survey of Ireland: with the establishment of that kingdom when the late Duke of Ormond was lord lieutenant (London 1719; online Farmington Hills 2006).

• Tracts; chiefly relating to Ireland (Dublin 1769), containing: I. A treatise of taxes and contributions, II. Essays in political arithmetic, III. The political anatomy of Ireland.


Scientific Honors:
He was knighted by Charles II.

References and Literature:
• Tony Aspromourgos, On the origins of classical economics: distribution and value from William Petty to Adam Smith (London 1996).
• T.C. Barnard, *Sir William Petty as Kerry ironmaster* (Dublin 1982).
• Yann Morvran Goblet, *A topographical Index of the parishes and townlands of Ireland in Sir William Petty’s mss* (Dublin 1932).
• Frances Harris, *The British Library catalogue of addition to the manuscripts: the Petty papers* (London 2000).
• Jan Hoff, *Kritik der klassischen politischen Ökonomie: zur Rezeption der werttheoretischen Ansätze ökonomischer Klassiker durch Karl Marx* (Köln 2004).
• Terence W. Hutchinson, *From William Petty to Adam Smith: the emergence of political economy, 1662-1776* (Nedlands 1989).
• Heino Klingen, Politische Ökonomie der Präklassik: die Beiträge Pettys, Cantillons und Quesnays zur Entstehung der klassische politischen Ökonomie (Marburg 1992).
• Sylva Kuehni, Die wert- und preistheoretischen Ideen William Pettys (Winterthur 1960).
• Henry William Edmund Petty-Fitzmaurice, Mis of Lansdowne, The double bottom, or twin-hulled ship of Sir William Petty (Oxford 1931).
• Walter Müller, Sir William Petty als politischer Arithmetiker (Geöhnhausen 1932).
• E.S. Pearson (ed.), Lectures of Statistics in the 17th and 18th Centuries against the changing background od intellectual, scientific and religious thought. Lectures by Karl Pearson given at University College London during the academic sessions 1921–1933 (London 1978) pp. 49-73.
• Cosimo Perrotta, Produzione e lavoro produttivo nel mercantilismo e nell’illuminismo (Galatina 1988).
• Friedrich Richter, Die Bedeutung von Sir William Petty für die Nationalökonomie (Diss. Graz 1963)
• Alessandro Roncaglia, Petty: the origins of political economy (Cardiff


**Author(s) of this contribution:**
Claudia von Collani