

PLATE XVI



Mary Smith

SIDNEY SMITH

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1889-1979

IT is probably true of all men that we can only judge their worth and their contribution to their time when we know their personal history and something of the motives which lay behind their actions. This is certainly true of Sidney Smith as of many distinguished scholars.

Sidney Smith was born in Leeds on 29 August 1889. His father, Sidney Smith, was second son of a printer in Salford and Manchester, also called Sidney Smith. As the second son he did not inherit an interest in the printing business, and became a journalist. Four years after Sidney's birth, he moved to London to take up a post as a reporter on *The News Chronicle*, and took up residence with his wife Ellen (née Crouch), his stepchildren Katherine and Stephen Brooker and Sidney in Bartholomew Villas, Kentish Town. Times were not good and home circumstances less than ideal, for there was little money. Sidney went first to an elementary school and then to a secondary school in Kentish Town, where his interest in academic subjects was early aroused. He was a regular attender at Sunday School at the local Methodist Church, where he acquired a life-long interest in the Old Testament from his teacher, who also took him to visit the British Museum. Thereafter as a boy he liked to walk through the galleries of the Egyptian and Assyrian Department, of which he was later to become Keeper.

In 1903 he won a local scholarship to the City of London School where a master, A. J. Spillsbury, encouraged Sidney Smith in his growing interest in mathematics and astronomy among other subjects. He wisely allowed him to concentrate during his last two years on Classics which enabled him to gain a twenty pound Classical Exhibition in 1907 to Queens' College, Cambridge. This, with the aid of benefaction from two City Livery Companies, enabled him to proceed though he had to continue to live in a frugal manner. He revelled in the opportunity to follow

¹ I am grateful for personal information provided by Professors H. S. Smith and H. W. F. Sagg. Quotations, unless otherwise acknowledged, have been drawn from the few personal papers of Professor Sidney Smith now extant, consulted by kind permission of Mrs Mary Smith.

lectures in other Faculties and continued his earlier interests in the history of the ancient Near East encouraged by A. B. Cooke, and began the study of Biblical Hebrew with S. A. Cook. This spreading of effort was detrimental to his chances in the Classical Tripos in 1911 when he failed to get the expected First, but it was to bear fruit later. He always considered that 'Classics is the best basis for any education, but that it is only a basis and there must be something else in view'. By now his mind was set on a career in the British Museum and so, there being no immediate vacancy, he went from Cambridge to teach classics, history and French at an independent preparatory school for boys at West Hayes in Hampshire. When P. D. Scott-Moncrieff, Assistant in the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities of the British Museum died on 8 February 1911, Smith was much disappointed to be passed over in favour of A. W. A. Leeper in the competition for the post that year. He betook himself, with characteristic determination, to the Friedrich-Wilhelm Universität, Berlin to advance his knowledge of German and Semitic languages, maintaining himself by teaching English. He attended lectures in a wide range of Oriental studies and from this time stemmed his real appreciation of the best German scholarship.

Fortunately, a further vacancy at the British Museum occurred through the move of Leeper to another Government department and this time Sidney Smith was a very strong candidate, taking Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Ancient History in the Civil Service examination. He was appointed Assistant (second class) in Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities under (Sir) E. A. W. Budge on 8 July 1914 but the outbreak of war prevented him taking up this post until 24 March 1919. It is noteworthy that, despite the hardships and struggles Smith referred to the years 1906–1914 as 'for me the great days'. He volunteered in 1914 for the Middlesex Regiment, serving as a subaltern in an infantry battalion in France. Three times he was seriously wounded yet each time he insisted on returning to the front after convalescence. He was twice mentioned in despatches. When he finally reached the Museum he was assigned by Budge to Assyrian studies, like his colleague Cyril Gadd, newly appointed following the death of L. W. King in 1919. He had to serve the apprenticeship expected in those days of entrants. They were required to master the subjects covered by their domain through self-education in cuneiform studies learned while performing the basic task of copying texts. His first assignment was to prepare for publication the tablets from Kultepe (Kanish) which recorded the ancient

trade between Anatolia and the capital Asshur. These were published as *Cuneiform Texts from Cappadocian Tablets in the British Museum* I–IV (1921–5), with his additional copies (with D. J. Wiseman) in Part V (1956). These texts do not seem to have interested him deeply apart from the problems of Anatolian trade and geography. He found and published an account of *The First Campaign of Sennacherib* (1921) and followed this up with detailed studies of Assyrian history for the *Cambridge Ancient History* I–V (1924). In this he realized the need to carry back the history of Assyria to its origins, the later period being then written up in popular form by L. W. King. It was with some reluctance that he turned back to the Cappadocian texts since he felt that at the time their meaning and import was insufficiently known. He was well aware of their importance and relevance to his writing of history and the resultant study, *The Early History of Assyria to 1000 BC* (1928) combined the evidence of the texts with that gained from archaeology and a knowledge of the Museum collections into what proved to be his most influential work destined to remain the standard reference volume on the subject for forty years. In this he was much encouraged by the collaboration of his gifted and artistic wife Mary, née Parker, whom he had married in 1926. She drew the maps and drawings for this, as for others of his publications.

Meanwhile Smith continued the study of unpublished texts in the Museum collections. In 1924 he published his *Babylonian Historical Texts*, editing new Babylonian Chronicles which advanced our knowledge of history from the time of Esarhaddon, c.685 BC to the time of the removal of the capital from Babylon to Seleucia in 275/4 BC. In this he showed his meticulous concern for detail and care to integrate all the new information with the relevant classical sources. He was among the first to draw on the historical data provided by the late Babylonian astronomical diaries. The result was a most original and long-lasting work of high calibre which he himself thought was his best.

At the same time Smith continued to copy other cuneiform texts, miscellaneous building inscriptions, bilingual lists, medical incantations and other omens appearing as *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets etc. in the British Museum*, Part XXXVII (1923). As a copyist his style, like that of his contemporary Gadd, was somewhat inflexible and not flowing. He was, however, careful and reliable, so that Budge could truthfully write of them both as ‘the heirs of Rawlinson in the British Museum, and their skill as accurate copyists and their profound knowledge of the ancient

Mesopotamian languages and history should make future parts of *Cuneiform Texts* peculiarly valuable'. For Sidney Smith the latter was not to prove his future work. In 1923 he was invited by Mr (later Sir) Leonard Woolley to be the epigraphist on the joint British Museum–University Museum, Philadelphia Mission to Ur. The experience introduced him to Iraq and its archaeological possibilities, though the restrictive nature of some of the expedition's life and practices were not altogether to his liking. However, his collaboration with Woolley was eventually to lead to his appointment, on secondment from the British Museum, as Director of Antiquities and Director of the Iraq Museum, housed since 1926 in an appropriate old Turkish building in Ma'amun Street (now the Museum of Costume). He made a major impact on both these offices. A system of registration of antiquities was organized which, in effect, is that which pertains today. Moreover, he brought order and fairness into the arrangements for foreign institutions to obtain concessions for archaeological work at specified sites. Gertrude Bell had exercised a very definite rule 'not to reserve any site for any institution even for a single year. An application would be accepted but this gave only the first applicant the option of starting work immediately or abandoning all claims if another applicant came in ready for work.' Smith steered a middle course, avoiding sites having to await excavations for years with the chance of their finally being abandoned for lack of funds or change of interest by arranging work at places which could be immediately opened for science. Smith held firm views as to the propriety of national 'claims' on certain sites. When Chiera asked him if 'he could have Nineveh or Nimrud without formalities, I replied that I considered Nineveh and Nimrud as sites to which the British Museum had a historical essential claim, as the French Government had at Khorsabad.' None the less, Smith asked the Council of Ministers in Baghdad to cable the French Government to inquire whether they had any intention of further work there. He knew Chiera had raised the necessary funds and was anxious to be free to work at Khorsabad on the understanding that 'in future the ancient city at the site shall be completely excavated to the satisfaction of an authorized representative of the Iraq Museum before excavations are considered finished and the expedition removes to another site.' Thus he played a role which has been decisive in all subsequent work in Mesopotamia.

His tenure of office in Baghdad was marked by extraordinary activity. Campbell Thompson reopened work at Nineveh

(Quyunjik), Woolley continued excavation at Ur and Watelin at Kish. The Germans under Jordan were at work at Warka and Samarra, while the Americans commenced their historic digs at Khorsabad (Dūr-Šarrukēn), Yorgan Tepe (Nuzi) and Tell Omar (Seleucia). Preparations for the expeditions to the Diyala Tell (Asmar) and Tell Billa (Šibaniba) were at an advanced stage. Yet a year later Smith was summoned home by the Trustees on H. R. Hall's death to take up appointment as Keeper of the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum in January 1931. He continued to push hard for work to be done in Iraq despite the depression. He was an active founder member of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq in 1932 and originator and editor of the first volume of its Journal, *Iraq*, two years later handing over the editorship to his colleague Gadd. His Keepership was marked by several innovations, not least the much improved display and decoration of the galleries. Despite the upheavals of the complete reorganization of the two Upper Galleries, Smith maintained a steady flow of original contributions on Semitic philology, ancient history, political geography, and Mesopotamian archaeology.

At this time Smith deliberately added to his labours, now increasingly administrative, the role of teacher. He worked *de novo* on Coptic with his colleagues Stephen Glanville and Eiddon Edwards. As one of the few Honorary Lecturers appointed by King's College, London he took his duties seriously numbering among his students for Assyrian Professor S. H. Hooke and D. J. Wiseman. He was 'Lecturer in Accadian Assyriology' from 1924–1938. In 1934 he was appointed Honorary Lecturer in Near Eastern Archaeology at the newly created Institute of Archaeology of the University of London in Regent's Park and in 1938 the University conferred upon him the title of Honorary Professor which he held until 1946. He taught for the Honours MA and Diploma in Mesopotamian studies of which he was the architect, as well as for the BA for Arts students at King's. Most of his teaching was crowded into post-Museum hours, but he never spared himself or his students, among whom several were to follow him into teaching positions (Margaret Munn-Rankin as Lecturer in NE Archaeology at Cambridge; Rachel Clay (Mrs R. Maxwell-Hyslop) and Barbara Parker (later Lady Mallowan) at the Institute of Archaeology, and D. J. Wiseman at the School of Oriental and African Studies).

Smith was elected an Honorary Fellow of his old College, Queens', in 1935 and admitted to the degree of Litt.D of

Cambridge University in 1941. That same year he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. He was a foreign member of the Koninklijke Vlaamsche Academie van Belgie and Ordentliches Mitglied of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut. Despite the onset of severe diabetes in 1933 he continued unabated in his many activities, though increasingly with a heavy heart as he was always sensitive to the political environment. He foresaw the coming conflict, leaving the International Congress of Orientalists in Brussels in 1938 as representative of the Museum early for this reason. He ceased to teach for a while to devote himself completely to arrangements for the protection and evacuation of the Museum collections. Already in Brussels he had taken steps to help some scholars there already doomed to be victims of the coming holocaust. Working with others he set about the rescue of a number of Jewish and Jewish-related scholars who faced Nazi persecution. Professor Kahle and his family were housed in Smith's own home in Hampstead until a job and accommodation could be found elsewhere. Throughout he thought it the duty of all German exiles to return to their country after the war.

He was much disappointed that, for reasons of health, he was unable to serve again in the Second World War or to gain a post in the Inter-Services Research Bureau that his colleague and friend Stephen Glanville sought for him. In addition to Home Guard and firewatching duties in Hampstead and at the Museum he therefore plunged himself into academic work. He wrote a preliminary report on the Alalakh tablets recently found by Woolley in Syria and, recognizing their major relevance to the problems of second millennium dating in Mesopotamia, especially of the First Amorite Dynasty of Babylon, published his *Alalakh and Chronology* at his own expense in 1940. On 1 October of that year the Secretary of the Academy, Sir Frederic Kenyon, invited him to deliver the Schweich Lectures on Biblical Archaeology suggesting something on 'the Chronology of the Nearer and Middle East'. He, however, offered to step down to help 'a needy scholar in exile who was counting on getting the Schweich Lecture for 1942 and needed the money' and finally accepted only on the assurance that he was no mere emergency substitute. He gave the lectures on 3–7 March 1941 and delivered the manuscript of *Isaiah Chapters XL–LV; Literary Criticism and History* on 26 May of the same year. Wartime restrictions precluded their publication before 1944. In these lectures he brought together his interests in history, political geography and literature of the years 556–539 BC which at that time awaited new sources for clarification. He aimed to show that

this part of Isaiah should be treated as a reliable historical source. His work also marks his quickening interest in Old Testament studies, but he was now a tired man having worked without any leave in the years 1939–42 and being in permanent residence at the Museum, to which he had moved in 1943 two years after his own home had been damaged by bombs.

His teaching responsibilities at the Institute of Archaeology had been taken over in part by Max Mallowan for whose appointment Smith had pushed tenaciously and his energies were now redirected to the post-war rehabilitation of the Museum collections. He was easily, and sometimes justifiably, frustrated by inaction or opposition of some colleagues in the Museum and became somewhat isolated. About this time he penned 'A Contribution to an Enquiry into the Conduct of Partly Uncontrolled Boards, Committees and Other Bodies Governing Public Undertakings and Institutions' but characteristically destroyed this with other papers on his retirement in 1955. He became somewhat restless in the face of what seemed to him inefficiency and obstinacy on the part of some Museum officials. At one time he hoped to follow his friend Professor S. H. Hooke in the Samuel Davidson Chair of Old Testament studies or to obtain a Fellowship at Cambridge, in either of which positions his undoubted abilities would have had free rein. On 30 September 1948, after thirty years' service, he retired on grounds of ill-health from the British Museum which he considered 'has about the best collections in the world and the best men to look after them' to take the Chair of Ancient Semitic Languages and Civilization in the University of London (his proposed title) in October of that same year. His objective was to establish at the School of Oriental and African Studies a section where there would be teaching in all the subjects properly covered by his title. He therefore deliberately chose not to limit himself to Assyriology and spent much research time on Aramaic and especially Epigraphic South Arabian. His main research results were published in an article in the *Bulletin of SOAS* which, although it contained much important material, subsequently received adverse criticism. Smith immersed himself in a detailed study of Near Eastern chronology in preparation for the revision of the *Cambridge Ancient History* I–II of which he was to be co-editor with A. J. B. Wace and Stephen Glanville. After the latter's untimely death in 1958 he resigned in favour of new editors. His index of subjects to be dealt with in his treatment of chronology alone amounted to more than a hundred sheets of paragraph headings, while the uncompleted work filled over 800

foolscap sheets of typescript in 1960. In 1949 he had published the text of the inscribed statue of Idrimi found at Alalakh. The most difficult script and dialect in which this royal autobiography, dated *c.* 1490 BC, was written did not deter him and the resultant initial publication stood largely intact until a revised edition was produced some thirty years later. He passed on the rest of the Alalakh texts for publication to another and, though he never approved of the form or some of the conclusions reached, refrained from public criticism, perhaps aware that he had set a deadline of some two years for the work to be concluded, which was insufficient either for the complexity or importance of the material.

Smith demanded total dedication from his students, who found him a stimulating teacher though most stood in awe of him. To beginners he sometimes gave the impression of demanding total agreement, though this only meant he was not prepared to discuss hypotheses propounded by a bright young man or woman until they had struggled to acquire an adequate acquaintance with the whole of the relevant evidence. In terms of teaching, his thoroughness demanded both breadth and depth from his students, who might find themselves covering a whole gamut from Old Assyrian Grammar through South Arabian texts to the campaigns of Alexander the Great. His basic kindness, under a stern exterior, was shown not only by his concern for his students but also by his attitude to contemporaries. While he himself was a merciless critic of any loose thinking or conclusions too easily drawn, a controversialist by predilection and training, formidable in argument, yet he was willing to acknowledge a change of mind when thoroughly convinced of such a necessity. It only required a hint that a scholar had received unjust treatment for him to spring to the defence. One distinguished scholar was regularly condemned for his enormities in the grammatical and historical field until Smith heard the full stories of his sufferings under the Nazis and subsequently, after which that scholar was never adversely mentioned again. His encouragement of many scholars can be judged by their public acknowledgement of his help and advice, among them Lady Drower, Professors A. Guillaume, J. B. Segal, Yakub Bakr and M. A. Ghul. Some of his friends have described Smith eloquently. Dame Agatha Christie refers to him as 'the learned Guru' and Max Mallowan writes that 'he was a mine of learning and provoked one to thought, if not always to agreement. His stimulating methods were applied to all and sundry, and he had a way of testing the resistance of anyone who came for an

interview. Often enough when faced with a newcomer he appeared to say to himself, "How can I get under this man's skin?" If a victim was unwise enough to fall into the trap he reacted violently, and thus immediately damned himself. But if a man took this form of punishment without blenching, he became a customer worth consideration. How often have I kept a careful silence at apparently outrageous statements to find Sidney was prepared to turn round in face of the evidence, for he was possessed of a good measure of common sense as well as of original thought. But for him to be intellectually wrong was to be morally wrong. That made him a difficult colleague but a most stimulating teacher. His learning was highly respected however aberrant it might appear at times' (*Mallowan's Memoirs*, pp. 304-5).

Fourteen of his students and colleagues combined to honour his seventy-seventh birthday in a special volume of *Iraq* (XXVIII/XXIX, 1966-7). The wide range of their contributions reflects both the interests and the influence of Sidney Smith himself.

The years of retirement from 1955 he passed at Barcombe, near Lewes in Sussex, looked after by his wife and justifiably proud of his son Henry Sidney who became Professor of Egyptology in the University of London in 1970 and of his daughter Zoë. As befits a battler, Sidney Smith was a keen bridge player. Always a person of strong liberal political views, he was a frequent contributor to the press on a wide range of topics. A regular attender at the Varsity match and follower of Sussex cricket, he retained his lively and penetrating interest in matters political, cultural, and historical to the end. Though always interested in the Bible, he was no regular churchgoer, though confirmed by the Bishop of Stepney at St. Giles in the Fields on 21 February 1954, and Christian ideals remained firm in him. He died quietly at home in his ninetieth year on 12 June 1979, having spent the day passing his reminiscences of Sir Leonard Woolley to a prospective biographer.

D. J. WISEMAN