

SYDNEY SMITH: REFORMER AND WIT

By Denis V. Arnold

(This paper by the late Denis Arnold, a former member of the association, is reproduced by the kind permission of his widow).

In 1809 the family of the famous Sydney Smith took up residence in Heslington, near York. The move from London was made on his appointment as rector of Foston, near Thornton-le-Clay. He was a man of whom the poet W.H.Auden once said. 'Among polemical writers there are a few who must be ranked very high by any literary standard and first among such I would place Hooker, Swift, Sydney Smith, and Bernard Shaw.' Innumerable articles have appeared about him, and his sayings are still constantly and frequently quoted. There are a number of published biographies, and in addition to editions of his writings a collection of his letters has been published. He was a man of whom the writer of the biographical notice in the Dictionary of National Biography' said. 'his general goodness and the strength of his affections are as unmistakable as his sincerity and the masculine force of his mind'. When an exhibition opened in the City of London in 1974, designed, as *The Times* of the day put it, to show that the City' is a nursery of culture and the flower of cities', that newspaper said also that the exhibition recalled obvious City worthies, from Donne and Milton to Sydney Smith and Daniel Defoe.

Why is he so famous? A number of reasons could be brought forward, but first and foremost would be his wit, which still delights us and is often quoted by people who may have only the haziest knowledge of the originator. When he was in London he had charmed the guests at many dinner parties at Holland House, the gathering place of the Whig celebrities of the day, under the eagle eye of their hostess, Lady Holland. Here is an extract from one of his letters to that lady:

How very odd, dear Lady Holland, to ask me to dine with you on Sunday the 9th when I am coming to stay with you from the 5th to the 12th. It is like giving a gentleman an assignation for Wednesday when you are going to marry him on the Sunday preceding – an attempt to combine the stimulus of gallantry with the security of connubial relations.

This is only one of hundreds of witticisms that make the name of Sydney Smith still remembered. But he is famous also for his writings, which helped to remove some of the injustices of his day. For example, in an article on the game laws, he pointed out that one quarter of all the commitments in Great Britain were for offences against the game laws, and he produced his often quoted words. 'In the meantime for every ten pheasants which fluttered in the wood, one English peasant was rotting in gaol.'

Woodford, Essex.

Sydney was born at Woodford, Essex, in 1771. His father Robert is said to have parted from his wife, at the church door immediately their wedding and left for America, whence he returned after some years and rejoined his patient wife! Sydney, after schooling at Winchester College and taking his degree at Oxford, decided to go into the Church though he would have preferred to have studied law. However, this profession had already been chosen by his elder brother, and the family's finances

would not allow for a second member to follow it. In later years lawyers were not to escape Sydney's wit. 'The bargain for my house at Heslington. Nearly finished. The lawyers discovered some flaw in the title about the time of the Norman Conquest: but thinking that the parties must have disappeared in the quarrels of York and Lancaster, I have waived the objection.'

Curacy at Netheravon

Having been ordained he obtained a curacy at Netheravon on Salisbury Plain. In those days this was a fairly isolated spot and the new clergyman, who was later to be the darling of Whig society in London at first found life very depressing and wrote 'I have no relish for the country; it is a sort of healthy grave.' He found that his parishioners, many of whom lived in squalid conditions, could hardly be called enthusiastic supporters of the church, but he persevered in doing what he could and received the encouragement of the squire, Michael Hicks Beach. The Beach family and Sydney became great friends, and when the time came for the elder Beach son to leave Eton and have a tutor to accompany him on a tour abroad Sydney was an obvious choice. However, the political situation on the continent changed and made it unwise for them to travel.

Edinburgh

Accordingly, it was decided that as Edinburgh was already a recognised centre of culture, the two should spend their time there instead. Sydney's view of Scotland and the Scots were hardly complimentary though he appreciated Edinburgh's beauty. 'No smells were equal to Scotch smells ... Yet the place is uncommonly beautiful and I am in constant balance between admiration and trepidation.'

In commenting on the caution to be used when walking along Edinburgh's streets, he said:

Taste guides my eye? where'er new beauties spread,
While prudence whispers 'Look before you tread'.

The Scots climate also was the subject of a little gentle chaffing: 'They would have you believe that their climate will ripen fruit, and it is upon record that, at the siege of Perth, the ammunition failing, their nectarines made admirable cannon-balls'.

While he was in Edinburgh, Sydney made the acquaintance of many well known people. These included Francis Jeffrey, who was later to become Lord Advocate for Scotland. Jeffrey and Sydney became involved with the founding of the *Edinburgh Review*, which Jeffrey later edited; it was in this famous Whig periodical that many of Sydney's writings appeared.

It was during his appointment as tutor to Michael Beech that Sydney married Catherine Pybus, who was to bear him five children. His marriage meant that Sydney had to seek more lucrative employment, so he moved to London in the hope of obtaining a clerical living. Here he acted in a kind of *locum* capacity for a number of clergymen and gave sermons and lectures. A series of the latter, subsequently published as *Elementary sketches of moral philosophy*, was delivered at the Royal Institution, and although not of great profundity, they were extremely popular and gained him many favourable comments. He also became known as excellent company

at a dinner party and his name figured frequently in the 'dinner books' of Holland House. A proper living, however, continued to elude him.

Yorkshire

At last, in 1809, he received the living of Foston-le-Clay, near York, and moved his family to Heslington where he stayed until his new rectory, at Thornton-le-Clay, was ready for occupation. It is said that when he was one of the guests at a dinner party in Bishopthorpe, given when he came up for his induction, he so enthralled his audience by his brilliant conversation that the Archbishop was heard afterwards to say that although he appreciated Sydney's abilities, he did not understand how one of the inferior clergy should be so much in possession of his faculties in the presence of his diocesan!

Sydney had loved the life of London society and at first bitterly regretted the move: he wrote to a friend that he was so far out of the way that he was actually twelve miles from a lemon. However, Sydney was of a philosophical turn of mind and rapidly determined to make the best of the circumstances, appreciating as he did the many advantages.

As he said, he missed the society of his friends but appreciated that he would have less expense and more space for his children; he was also pleased with what he had seen of York. Later, he was to say, 'I am not leading precisely the life I should choose, but ...as long as I can possibly avoid it I will never be unhappy.'

There had been no resident clergyman at Foston for many years, and the reason for Sydney's having to build was that there was no recent rectory the existing building was hardly more than a hovel. An impression is obtained that the church itself had been neglected. Sydney thus described his first preaching, 'When I began to thump the cushion of my pulpit ...as is my wont when I preach, the accumulated dust of hundred and fifty years made such a cloud that for some minutes I lost sight of my congregation.' This night be coupled with one of his other remarks about his preaching, 'I have the pleasure of seeing my audience nod approbation while they sleep.'

Sydney at first tried to employ an architect to design his new rectory, but on receiving the architect's plans wrote to him, 'You build for glory, I for use', and set about the task himself. Eventually the new rectory was ready for occupation. In a graphic account written by Mrs. Sydney Smith in her old age, she described the day of arrival when, with a baby in her arms, she had to make her way through the mud in which the carriage had got stuck. 'There was a very merry tea-making upon some of the boxes piled up in the drawing-room,' which as yet had no doors.

Macaulay, the essayist and historian, whom Sydney had first met at Holland House, visited Foston when he was attending the assizes at York, and described the rectory as 'the very neatest, most commodious. and most appropriate rectory that I ever saw'. He became a great friend of the family and the two men must have had some excellent talks together, for Macaulay rivalled Sydney as a conversationalist. On one occasion Sydney could not resist a dig at his famous contemporary and said of him, 'He has occasional flashes of silence that make his conversation perfectly delightful.'

Sydney settled down to the cares and duties of a country clergyman with an assiduity and devotion that were typical of him. He really cared for his parishioners, and quite apart from doing what he could for their moral and spiritual welfare, he was concerned for their health and let them parts of his glebe for the growing of vegetables. He also tended them medically: he had always been interested in medicine and when in Edinburgh had attended lectures in the subject. During an influenza epidemic at Foston he wrote to a friend. 'The influenza to my great joy has appeared here, and I am in high medical practice'. On the shelves of one of the rooms in the house was stored a vast range of medicines, amongst them being two bottles labelled respectively 'Up with it' and 'Dead-stop', of which the uses need no explanation.

Sydney's popularity, which had made him many friends in London, soon gained him many in the northern countryside, among them being Lord Harewood and the Lambtons of Lambton Castle. The former appreciated not only Sydney's brilliant conversation, but also his culinary skills, for on one occasion Sydney gave the household a lesson in salad making. According to him the salads at Harewood 'were poor and insignificant till I gave them a lesson, which (considering it was my first visit) was a strong measure. But it is difficult for a person like myself, who has turned his attention to salads, to witness without instruction and remonstrance the mistakes and follies which are every day committed with salads'.

Good food was always to be one of Sydney's pleasures. He once jokingly said that '...I must, by my voracity, have starved to death fully a hundred persons.' In spite of popular account, Sydney was not the person of whom it was said that his idea of heaven was eating *pâtés de foie gras* to the sound of trumpets: Sydney made the statement, but of a certain eminent lawyer, not of himself. Actually, Sydney disliked listening to loud music and, according to his daughter, had no great passion for *pâtés de foie gras*. Sydney once said of the performance of an oratorio in York, 'How absurd to see 500 people fiddling like madmen about Israelites in the Red Sea'. Later, when he was a canon of St. Paul's he wrote, '*Semiramis* would be to me pure misery. I love music very little. I hate acting....The whole thing seems to me so childish and so foolish that I cannot abide it. Moreover, it would be rather out of etiquette for a Canon of St. Paul's to go to the opera; and, where etiquette prevents me from doing things disagreeable to myself. I am a perfect martinet.' Notwithstanding these statements against music, his daughter says in her memoirs that he was fond of singing and took part in trios with his wife and daughter.

Injustices and reform

At Foston Sydney was very busy with his writing for the *Edinburgh Review* and it was becoming even more apparent to the outside world that these reviews reflected the opinions of a champion of reform in many branches of English life. For example, in his previous years at Netheravon Sydney must have been come up against the iniquities of the laws against poaching, laws which paid little regard for human life. Spring-guns and man-traps were in common use and many persons who suffered from them had injuries from which they never recovered. In one or two articles Sydney did his best to point out the cruelties involved. In 1808 there appeared under Sydney's name a review in which he took up the case of the injustices that were at that time suffered by Roman Catholics. In this paper he said that the Catholics' cause was 'the cause of common sense and justice...it rests upon the soundest principles; leads to the most important consequences; and therefore cannot be too frequently

brought before the notice of the public'. He wrote further on the subject, and although he was to deny the authorship very emphatically, he was and is firmly regarded as the writer of a series of articles on the same theme that started to appear in the previous year under the title 'Letters on the subject of the Catholics to my brother Abraham, who lives in the country,' and purported to be by a certain Peter Plymley. Sydney also spoke on the subject whenever an opportunity arose, and he was often a lone voice amongst the other members of his cloth. At a meeting of the Clergy of the Archdeaconry of Cleveland at Thirsk on 24th March, he submitted a counter petition to the one put forward by his fellow clergymen in which they protested against the emancipation of the Roman Catholics: his counter proposal was defeated by twenty two votes to ten. Again, at Beverley on 11th April 1825, in speaking at a meeting of the clergy of the Archdeaconry of the East Riding, he said 'it is very disagreeable to me to differ from so many worthy and respectable clergymen here assembled, and ...I am so afraid, to stand among them.' However, he was later to see the successful outcome of his efforts, for in April 1829, just two days before the sad death of his son Douglas, at the age of twenty four, and in the year when Sydney was to leave Yorkshire for a living in Somerset, he heard of the successful passage of the Catholic Emancipation Bill.

His espousal of the Catholics's cause should not be taken as in any way indicating that he supported Roman Catholicism: his main concern was that there should be justice and toleration. As he said in one of his papers, 'The true spirit is to search after God and for another life with lowliness of heart; to fling down no man's altar, to punish no man's prayer; to heap no penalties and no pains on those solemn supplications which in divers tongues, and in various forms and in the temples of a thousand shapes, but with one deep sense of human dependence, men pour forth to God.' Sydney wrote on many other topics during his time at Foston and later: they ranged over Methodism, education, prison reform, Charles James Fox (Lord Holland was Fox's nephew), chimney sweeps, and many others. Other than catholic emancipation to which reference has been made, two of the main causes that Sydney had very much at heart were reforms in the church itself and reforms in parliament. It should be remembered that at this time seats in parliament could still be bought: as Sydney said, 'What right has this lord or that Marquis, to buy ten seats in parliament, in the shape of Boroughs, and then make laws to govern me?' Most of Sydney's interest in church reform occurred after he had departed from Foston, but he had been exercised about conditions in the church for many years before. In 1808, in an article in the *Edinburgh Review*, Sydney attacked some of the misconceptions about the salaries of curates. In this paper Sydney gave vent to his long dislike of the episcopal bench a dislike which was undoubtedly a major factor in his never himself being made a bishop. Here are some paragraphs from the article, passages of which the editor of the 1840 edition of Sydney's *Works* described as 'bold language for the year 1808.'

It is in vain to talk of the good character of bishops. Bishops are men; not always the wisest of men; not always preferred for eminent virtues and talents, or for any good reasons whatever known to the public. They are almost devoid of striking or indecorous vices; but a man may be very shallow, very arrogant, and very vindictive, though a bishop; and pursue with unrelenting hatred a subordinate clergyman, whose principles he dislikes and whose genius he fears.

In a variety of articles and speeches Sydney poured forth his worries about the Church of England. That he was fundamentally concerned about the restraint of power and the application of justice comes out in the following words from an article on 'Persecuting bishops':

Our only object in meddling with the question is to restrain the arm of Power within the limits of moderation and justice - one of the great objects which first led to the establishment of this journal [*Edinburgh Review*], and which, we hope, will always continue to characterize its efforts.

He was no lover of disputation about doctrinal niceties: he regarded that it was far more important for men of senior position in the church to possess 'an ounce of mother wit...discretion, good manners, common sense, and good nature'.

Sydney's household at Foston was without doubt an extremely happy one; for this there is evidence from the memoirs written by his daughter. One obtains the impression that he was greatly loved and respected by his domestic staff, as well as by his parishioners. This respect was held in spite of his rather untidy appearance: his daughter once said of him that 'his neckcloth always looked like a pudding tied round his throat, and the arrangement of whose garments seemed more the result of accident than design.'

He was devoted to innovation where he thought its use would be beneficial: at his front door were a speaking trumpet and a telescope. With the help of these he directed operations on the farm. During the designing of Foston Rectory he introduced what he termed his 'shadrachs', these being tubes by which air from outside fed the firegrates. He designed a kind of 'rheumatic armour' which he wore when suffering from this affliction and which included a tin helmet, filled with hot water, which he wore on his head. In his fields he had what he called his 'universal Scratcher' against which, as he said, every animal, from a lamb to a bullock, can rub and scratch itself with the greatest facility and luxury', and which must have saved his fences from a considerable amount of damage.

Castle Howard

In 1815 there began a friendship that made a considerable difference to the kind of life that Sydney was leading at Foston. One summer day that year the Smith family's attention was drawn to a commotion outside the house; they perceived a coach and four, with outriders, plunging in the mud of a ploughed field. It appeared that the coachman had mistaken the road, and men were sent to the rescue. The coach was that of Lord and Lady Carlisle of Castle Howard: they were making their first visit to the famous London wit who had come to live in their neighbourhood. Thus began a wonderful friendship and there was to be hardly a week without a meeting between Sydney and the Carlises. In later years he was to say, 'The only one of my Yorkshire virtues which I retain is a sincere regard for Castle Howard and its inhabitants.'

With all his fun and apparent levity, the serious part of his nature was, as his daughter said in her memoirs, 'the foundation, or rather storehouse, from which all his wit and imagination sprang, and which gave them such value in the eyes of the world'. He had the ability of being able to distinguish with great clarity the principal points of an argument or a problem and to be able to argue without losing his temper. He stressed

how important it was for a person to discover his or her own weaknesses on any subject and then to master them. He deplored self-reproach when things were going wrong and preached a philosophy of optimism. As he once said, 'Some very excellent people tell you they dare not hope; why do they not dare to hope? To me it seems much more impious to dare to despair.' Although he did not hesitate to attack what he thought were weaknesses in the church and to suggest improvements, he was always concerned that the true basis of a religious life should be maintained. On one occasion he wrote to Jeffrey then editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, about an anti-Christian article that had appeared in that publication. As he said. 'You must be thoroughly aware that the rumour of infidelity decides not only the reputation, but the existence of the Review.. Do you mean to take care that the Review shall not profess infidel principles? Unless this is the case, I must absolutely give up all connection with it.' On the same incident he also wrote, 'I hate the insolence, persecution and Intolerance, which so often pass under the name of religion, and, as you know, have fought against them; but I have an unaffected horror of irreligion and impiety, and every principle of suspicion and fear would be excited in me by a man who professed himself an infidel'.

Bristol and Combe Florey

Sydney was particularly pleased when in 1828 he was made a prebend of Bristol Cathedral. As his daughter wrote, he felt that this appointment broke 'that spell which had hitherto kept him down in his profession... enabling him to show the world how well he could fulfil his duties, wherever placed'. His first sermon in Bristol, on the 5th November, caused quite a stir. when instead of the expected attack on Catholics, prompted by the date of the occasion, he put in a plea for religious toleration. It would seem that his speeches and writings in support of Catholic emancipation had not made quite the same impression in Bristol as they had elsewhere. His daughter refers to the remarkable effect Sydney had on the interest displayed in the cathedral services. Whereas as before his inaugural sermon the cathedral had usually been almost deserted, now whenever he was billed to preach the church became 'filled to suffocation...the men holding up their hats above their heads, that they might not be crushed by the pressure.' By his appointment to Bristol Sydney became entitled to one of the local livings. The time was therefore ripe for him to move to the south; there was additional reason in that Foston was so full of memories of his son, Douglas, who had just died at the age of 24.

The living to which the family moved in 1829 was that of Combe Florey, in Somerset: in a letter to some Yorkshire friends, Sydney wrote: 'Good, excellent, and amiable friends, such as we met at Escrick [near York], I did not expect to find. Fortune may grant such favours once in a life, but they must not be counted upon. Your family are always among our sincere regrets. This is a beautiful place; the house larger than Foston. with a wood of three or four acres belonging to it close to the house, and a glebe of sixty acres surrounding it, in a country everywhere most beautiful and fertile'. To Lady Grey, another old friend he wrote. 'My neighbors look very much like other people's neighbors; their remarks are generally of a meteorological nature.'

St. Paul's

A further advance in the church came when in 1831 Lord Grey, anxious to do something for Sydney in return for the latter's support of the Whig party, was able to say that the King, acting on Grey's recommendation, had agreed to the appointment of Sydney as a Canon Residentiary of St. Paul's Cathedral.

There is little doubt that at one stage in his career Sydney had hoped for a bishopric, but he came to realise that his criticisms of the church, and of bishops in particular, had seriously prejudiced his chances in that direction, and he later said that he would refuse one if it were offered. That some of the authorities were later sorry that they had never made him one is evidenced by Lord Melbourne's having said, after Sydney's death, that his refusal to make him a bishop was something that he regretted and about which he had a certain feeling of guilt.

Sydney's years at Combe Florey were punctuated by prolonged stays in London, since he devoted much of his time to his responsibilities at St. Paul's. One has to admit also that he relished being once again able frequently to dine in good company, where his conversation was as much welcomed as ever.

Perhaps the following words from the Dean of St. Paul's, made after Sydney's death, will convey some sense of the meticulous way in which Sydney carried out his duties for that cathedral:

I find traces of him in every particular of Chapter affairs: and, on every occasion where his hand appears, I find stronger reasons for respecting his sound judgment, knowledge of business, and activity of mind; above all, the perfect fidelity of his stewardship...His management of the affairs of St. Paul's...only commenced too late and terminated too soon.

His health eventually began to fail, but his humour remained. Recovering from one bout of illness, he remarked to a correspondent, 'If you hear of sixteen or eighteen pounds of human flesh, they belong to me. I look as if a curate had been taken out of me'. In a description of himself and his wife at this time he wrote: 'Mrs. Sydney has eight distinct illnesses and I have nine. We take something every hour and pass the mixture from one to the other'. The end came one evening in February, 1845, and he was buried in the cemetery of Kensal Green. Possibly no better way of ending this short account of his life could be found than to quote the following words from his tombstone:

The Rev. Sydney Smith, one of the best of men. His talents, though admitted by his contemporaries to be great, were surpassed by his unostentatious benevolence, his fearless love of truth, and his endeavour to promote the happiness of mankind by religious toleration and rational freedom.

© The estate of Denis V. Arnold, 1988.

Works by and about Sydney Smith a selection

(The editions given are those consulted by the author).

Bell, A. *Sydney Smith*, Oxford, Clarendon Press. 1980.

Bell, A. *Sydney Smith: rector of Foston, 1806-1829*. University of York, Borthwick Papers No. 42. 1972.

Bell, A. *The letters of Sydney Smith*. Manchester, The John Rylands University Library of Manchester. 1976.

Bullett, S. *Sydney Smith...* London, 1951.

Burdett, O. *The Rev. Sydney Smith*. London, 1934.

Halpern, S. *Sydney Smith*. New York, Twayne, 1966.

Holland [Saba] Lady. *A memoir of the Reverend Sydney Smith*. London, 1855.

Pearson, H. *The Smith of Smiths*. London, 1945.

Reid, S.J., *The life and times of Sydney Smith*, London, 1896,

Russell, G.W.E., *Sydney Smith*. London, Macmillan. 1905.

Smith, Sydney, *The letters of Peter Plymley...with selected writings, sermons, and speeches*. London, 1929.

_____ *The letters of Sydney Smith*, ed. by Nowell C. Smith, Oxford, 1953.

_____ *Sermons*. London, 1846.

_____ *The works of the Rev. Sydney Smith*!. London, 1840.

_____ *The wit and wisdom of the Rev, Sydney Smith*, London, 1869.