

Unpublished letters of Rev Sydney Smith (1771-1845)

A large selection of Sydney Smith's letters, edited by Nowell C Smith was published by Oxford University Press in two volumes in 1953. This edition is long out of print, and is expensive to acquire. Alan Bell, archivist and one of Smith's biographers was preparing a revised and much enlarged edition of Sydney Smith's letters, in association with Oxford University Press (OUP), but the project fell through in the 1980s. Alan made typed transcripts of over 1000 hitherto unpublished letters, many of which would be of considerable interest to historians and students of literature. He quoted extensively from these in his biography published in 1980. Bell made meticulous notes as to the location of the originals at the time, although some were in private hands and have since been sold. He also made Xeroxes and photocopies of most of the originals that he had located. He prepared a day by day diary of Smith's known movements and locations, and he kept notes and copies of reviews of secondary sources relating to the period. Bell filed the Xeroxes and photocopies in alphabetical order of the individual owner at the time, the archive or library.

Bell also made extensive notes and corrections on the 1953 edition, observing that the letters in this edition were 'riddled with errors', probably because Nowell C. Smith had relied on 'A Memoir of the Reverend Sydney Smith. By his Daughter, Saba Lady Holland. With a Selection from his Letters, edited by Mrs. Austin. Published by Longman and Co'.

In December 2014, Bell handed the typescripts to Jeremy Cunningham, Chairman of the Sydney Smith Association. He hoped that the project might be revived. Although the transcripts are complete, there are few footnotes or contextual explanations, and if a publisher were to take on their publication, an editor with a good literary and historical understanding of the early 19th century would be needed. Cunningham has made a number of approaches to historians and publishers, including OUP, but as yet little progress has been made.

The Fellows of New College, Oxford (Sydney Smith's college) have kindly agreed to house the collection in New College Library, so that future scholars may have the opportunity to consult the letters, or even to take the project forward at some time in the future. Alan Bell has transferred any copyright on the typescripts to the Sydney Smith Association, and in the event of the Association's being wound up, this will be transferred to New College.

In the two years that the transcripts have been in the possession of the Sydney Smith Association, Jeremy Cunningham scanned a large selection to PDF files. Those letters that already appeared in some form in the published edition are omitted, as are short ephemeral letters such as invitations and acceptances. In the absence of progress towards a revised edition, the Sydney Smith association has decided that the letters should be placed on the web under an 'open source' approach, so that readers and scholars can make use of them for their work. The files are organized by year, apart from pre-1800 letters.

The Association does not have the resources to establish and run an interactive website. Suggestions and comments on letters may be sent to Professor Graham Parry. gp8@york.ac.uk We cannot promise to reply to all of them, but bibliographic information, historical or literary notes may be kept and published on this site from time to time.

Jeremy Cunningham, Oxford

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