

## **Working it out for himself - the case of Edwin W. Smith, Primitive Methodist Missionary**

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Edwin W. Smith was eminent as a missionary/anthropologist in the first half of the twentieth century. Although he was largely forgotten for many years after his death in 1957 his life and work has been the subject of recent articles and research programmes, particularly since 1993.<sup>1</sup> Smith had little formal education so his rise to professional and academic prominence is impressive and intriguing. This paper traces the varied influences involved in his missionary formation.

Offsetting his early shortcomings in education Edwin Smith had many advantages not to say a privileged background so far as his missionary career was concerned. These contributed to his development but have to be seen alongside other beneficial influences and his considerable natural abilities.

The chief advantage was Edwin Smith's father, John Smith, who began as an agricultural labourer, became a local preacher, minister and missionary and was Connexional Missionary Secretary and President of the PM Conference. He was from East Anglia where the idea of PM African missions was conceived and, though it was slow to start, this activity began in 1870 with missions in West and South Africa. John Smith had been asked to join this work early on but serious family illness held him up until 1874 when he and his new wife went to Aliwal North where he served for two periods of five years. Their first son, Edwin, was born there in 1876 and always valued his early life among black and white South Africans. At his parents' insistence he learned Afrikaans as well as English which got his linguistic talent off to an early start.

John Smith was an energetic missionary and an avid reader who acquired a large theological library as well as many books on Africa. He was a progressive thinker and expressed his missionary thinking in his Hartley lecture of 1900, *Christ and Missions*. There he asserted that African Christians should not become black Europeans but should affirm their African identity. He also believed that African hearts and minds were reached through their languages. It is clear that Edwin Smith was influenced by these ideas and built on them himself. He was also an avid reader in his father's library. Some of the books, including Colenso on the Penteteuch, led to scepticism as he wrestled with evolution and higher criticism but this was resolved into a pragmatic faith with the help of a local minister, William Mincher. Although Bishop Colenso was a very controversial author at the time it is very likely that Edwin Smith came across the bishop's sympathetic support for Africans. He always held Colenso in high regard.

Smith's eyes were also attracted to his father's books on Africa. He read them eagerly and acquired a detailed knowledge of the exploration of what was known as the Dark Continent. This fed his longing to return to the land of his birth.

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<sup>1</sup> For Smith see my *Quiet Wise Spirit: Edwin W. Smith [1876-1957] and Africa*, Epworth, 2002. A list of Smith researches is added at the end of this paper.

His call to work in Africa came as he helped his father with secretarial work. John Smith was drafting an article to encourage the PM people to support a new mission among the Ila in Central Africa. As his father described this venture Edwin Smith, who was recording it in shorthand, heard the call to translate the New Testament into Ila.

For the first time in our history as a church, we are face to face with vast tribes of heathens, never before touched by any Christian church... Ponder the fact that the religion we take them is something totally different from what they have ever heard of or believed... Ponder the further fact that they have no written language. Their speech must be acquired and reduced to written form; then the word of God must be translated into that language. This translation, in order to be of real value, must be made from the Greek text. Until the language has been dealt with we shall remain profoundly ignorant of the inner life of these people. So my father went on dictating and I went on writing, and before he had finished, my mind was made up. By God's help, that should be my work: the reduction of this new language to writing. Next day, I enrolled in a Greek class at Birkbeck College, and as I went to and fro my daily work on top of a horse-drawn bus, I conned my Greek grammar.<sup>2</sup>

Of his father's influence Edwin Smith would say, 'My father's example will ever be my inspiration'.<sup>3</sup>

Smith then began three years of preparation for his missionary vocation. He started with evening classes in Greek at Birkbeck College and with his daily work in an estate agents office this took up much of his time for the next few years. At the same time, however, he was studying the Bible using the most recent critical works, e.g. Sanday and Headlam's International Critical Commentary on Romans (1895). He also embarked on local preaching and candidating for the PM ministry. He came first in the candidate's examinations but did not go to Hartley College to train under Dr Peake. After being accepted he came across a leaflet for Livingstone College. This institution founded in about 1894 and situated in the East End of London provided basic medical training for missionaries.<sup>4</sup> It seemed ideal for his purpose and he succeeded in persuading the training committee to allow him to spend a year there. Although the course was medical and practical he read widely during that time and contributed articles and reviews to PM publications.

Livingstone College was useful for Smith's preparation and David Livingstone after whom it was named was his missionary hero and he often visited Livingstone's grave in Westminster Abbey. He had a few criticisms of Livingstone but in an early article stated that Livingstone's success 'lay in his method of dealing with the natives. He treated them as men and brothers.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Edwin Smith's reminiscences, on tape in author's collection, and in typescript, MMS Archives, SOAS <sup>3</sup> Smith Papers MS Archives Fiche 589 c 1900

<sup>3</sup> Smith Papers MS Archives Fiche 589 c 1900

<sup>4</sup> The Record, November, 1897, SPMMS Fiche 576

<sup>5</sup> The Record, October 1897, SPMMS Fiche 576

Smith would emulate this attitude through his missionary career and lifelong interaction with Africa.

The next part of Smith's missionary training took him to Lesotho for what he would describe as his apprenticeship. His father had been very impressed by the Paris Evangelical missionaries who were as enlightened as any missionaries could have been in those days and sent his son to be their pupil. This provided him with a variety of experiences: learning Sotho, preaching, teaching, medical work, evangelism and going to places of interest. During the Christmas holidays of 1898 he toured the other mission stations and at Thaba Bosiu met the Rev E. Jacottet.<sup>6</sup> This proved to be a formative experience as Jacottet's enthusiasm for all things Bantu left a deep impression on Smith. In particular Jacottet shared his expertise in linguistics and gave Smith many practical ideas for learning the language of the Ila people in Central Africa.

Smith was married in October 1899 and he and his wife, Julia, spent their honeymoon in the Cape Town area. As well as sightseeing they visited archives and studied notes by Livingstone on the languages around the Zambezi. They also went to the Missionary Training Institute run by the renowned Andrew Murray at Wellington 40 miles north of Cape Town. Smith considered it an excellent place but set out his own ideas for an ideal missionary training course. This would extend over five or six years with a wide range of subjects – church history, theology and the principles of translation along with practical subjects such as agriculture, building and photography and all rounded off with a year or two devoted to elementary medicine and surgery. Such a course did not exist at the time but Smith thought that the Moravian institutions in Germany came closest.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile he used his initiative to cover the ground. Years later his wife would remark 'he is like grandpa Smith if he wants to do something he will do it if he can'.<sup>8</sup>

The Boer War kept the Smiths in Aliwal North from 1899-1902 and he worked as a circuit minister and continued his studies. Jacottet had advised Smith to acquire and analyse Ila folk tales and he actually made a start with Sotho tales and grammar during this waiting period. By the time he and his family went to Central Africa to work among the Ila Smith was an experienced minister and missionary who had spent more than half his life in Africa. He had devoted much thought and time to his preparation and in Central Africa put his training and experience into action and set about building, language study, teaching, medical work and evangelism with enthusiasm.

Two further aspects of his missionary formation came to the fore during his time among the Ila – [a] fulfilment theology and African religion and [b] language study and anthropology.

#### [a] Fulfilment theology and African religion

The influences of Livingstone, Colenso, John Smith and Jacottet combined with his language study and experience of meeting with Africans started a journey of respect for Africans which continued throughout Smith's life. He took African religious traditions seriously early in his missionary career and wrote papers on the subject in 1907. He went far in making the subject

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<sup>6</sup> On Jacottet see now the biography, *Murder at Morija*, Tim Couzens, Random House, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> ? PM Magazine 1900, 510, SPMMS, Fiche 580

<sup>8</sup> Julia Smith to Violet Smith, 11 Feb 1949 -in Tilbe family records.

sufficiently prominent and respectable in the 1920s and 30s for it to be taken up by academics.<sup>9</sup>

Smith's interest in African religion may have been questioned by his fellow PMs but he would have replied that an understanding of their religion was essential to understanding Africans and provided a vital point of contact in reaching Africans with the gospel of Christ. He had certainly put this into practice at an early stage in discussion with Africans in 1906. He would ask them for their names for God and, using Paul's visit to Athens in Acts 17, went on to link these names and other beliefs with Christian faith and to show how Christ was congenial to African ideas.<sup>10</sup> Smith was thus an early exponent of fulfilment theology which was already being followed in India by J. N. Farquahar. This sees existing religious traditions as stepping-stones to Christianity which is regarded as their fulfilment much as Christ may be regarded as the fulfilment of Jewish hopes. Fulfilment theology can be criticised but whatever its weaknesses it did have the virtue of requiring a respectful attitude to other religions and for Smith it opened the way into seeing the missionary as a maker of understandings or introducer<sup>11</sup> which is another name for dialogue. The interesting question is how Smith, relatively isolated in Africa, came upon and developed fulfilment theology.

#### [b] Anthropology

Smith's ideal missionary training as he saw it in 1899 made no mention of anthropology but by 1909 he had joined the Royal Anthropological Institute and was embarking on serious anthropological research. Jacottet's friend Henri Junod in South Africa and John Roscoe in Uganda were following the same path. Smith would read their works as they were published but his own interest in the subject had already started and his observations of villages in Lesotho in 1898-99 show that he had a natural aptitude for it. Moreover, Jacottet had advised him to study folk tales in order to unravel language structures. As Smith delved into such matters he realised that language and the cultural setting are interrelated so expanded his linguistic studies to cover the whole social context of the people. He took a leading part in researching and writing *The Ill-Speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia*, 2 vols, 1920, with A. M. Dale. This classic work of anthropology established his reputation in the subject and he became involved in it in a big way.<sup>12</sup> He read widely in this new subject and as a thoughtful field worker was at the cutting edge of developments in anthropology. Smith advocated it as a very important subject for missionaries in training to take seriously.<sup>13</sup> This wider approach led him to expand his missiology to include translation of the faith into culturally appropriate forms.

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<sup>9</sup> Smith's contribution to the study of religion in Africa is covered in Young, W. John, "They have laid hold of some essential truths", Edwin W. Smith (1876-1957) a wise listener to African voices'; in *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (edited by Frieder Ludwig & Afe Adogame), Otto Harrassowitz in Wiesbaden, 2004, 197-205.

<sup>10</sup> Smith developed this in *African Beliefs and Christian Faith*, 1936, which was a pioneer work in African Christian Theology.

<sup>11</sup> Smith was impressed by *The Friendly Road*, David Grayson, which suggested this idea in relation to race relations. David Grayson was the pseudonym of Ray Stannard Baker (1870-1946) an investigative journalist and biographer of Woodrow Wilson who saw his life's work as a 'maker of understandings', Baker, R.S., *American Chronicle*, New York, C. Scribner's Sons, 1945, 133. Also see Bannister, R.C. Jr., *Ray Stannard Baker. The Mind and Thought of a Progressive*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961.

<sup>12</sup> He became President of the Royal Anthropological Institute 1933-5.

<sup>13</sup> e.g. in IRM 1923 and 1934 RAI Presidential Address.

## Conclusion

Smith's missionary formation came from several sources [a] rôle models [b] scholarly reading especially of the Bible [c] practical experience of working with people of other cultures and [d] an understanding and respectful attitude. As a training method it was somewhat makeshift and haphazard but suited Smith. He was an explorer at heart and found his way through the jungle of important issues without getting lost and was thus able to guide other people through his advice and writings. Smith drew on established disciplines, adapted and developed the emerging social sciences and integrated them into his missiology which was basically a theology of translation, from language to language and from culture to culture. This resourcefulness worked for him but he always recommended that missionaries should have a thorough training.

## *Bibliography*

There is a very full bibliography of Smith works and sources of information in my book on Edwin Smith, *The Quiet Wise Spirit: Edwin W. Smith (1876-1957) and Africa*, Epworth Press, 2002. The Smith papers in the MMS Archives include his published articles in the 1890s and his journal for 1898 -1901 and provided much relevant material for this article.

### *The Position in Smith Studies, November 2004.*

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\* Short encyclopaedia article - up to 1000 words.

\*\* Article up to about 5000 words.

\*\*\* Longer studies up to 50,000 words.

\*\*\*\* Substantial studies over 50,000 words.