

Edwin Smith and the Printed Word

John Young

Edwin W. Smith¹ (1876-1957) was a Methodist Missionary from the Primitive Methodist tradition. He was born in South Africa and after education in England served in South and Central Africa until 1915 and after a year as war chaplain worked for the Bible Society until 1939. He was involved in pioneer and general missionary work but his initial call was to be a Bible translator and this along with his other writings means that he could rightly be described as a literary missionary. His pen and typewriter were hard at work for more than 60 years and millions of words from them turned up in print and resulted in about 30 books, around 50 substantial articles, papers and review articles as well as many other reviews and much popular journalism. He was also drawn into editorial work.² This paper will survey and assess his contribution as a missionary writer.

Bible Translation

Smith, influenced by his father, started to learn Greek as soon as he heard the call to translation work. He signed up for evening classes in Greek at Birkbeck College and made himself thoroughly familiar with the Greek New Testament using the latest commentaries and reference books to help him. In Africa he applied himself to serious study of African languages, first of all Sotho during a prolonged stay in South Africa and Lesotho, then Ila after he arrived in Zambia in 1902. He first wrote an Ila Handbook which was a thorough grammar of the language along with a full dictionary of Ila. This was published by the Oxford University Press in 1907. By that time he had translated Mark's gospel into Ila and on returning from furlough in 1909 began translating the rest of the New Testament. He did this alongside setting up a new mission station at Kasenga by the Kafue River in Zambia. Smith found house building and the other necessary practical demands a drain on the energy he wanted to use for translation work but by the end of 1909 was able to give regular time to his Ila translation. Smith's method was as follows: he would make a draft translation of a book or several chapters then would discuss this with Pauluse Kaiyobe his language assistant and right hand man. After comparing it again with the Greek he typed up copies for further discussion.

¹ See Young, W. John, *The Quiet Wise Spirit: Edwin W. Smith (1876-1957) and Africa*, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002 for a biographical study of Smith; Young W. John, 'The Legacy of Edwin W. Smith', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol 25, No 3, July 2001, 126-30 is an overview article. McVeigh, M., *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity*, Cape Cod, Mass.: Claude Starke, 1974 discussed Smith's religious ideas.

² For the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Royal African Society and the International African Institute.

Later on he had some help from the Revd John Price who joined the Ila mission in 1906 and became proficient in Ila. A translation committee was formed which included representatives from two other missions who were active on the southern borders of Ilaland – the Brethren in Christ at Macha and the Anglicans at Mapanza. Smith was editor in chief and drafted most of the translation but Acts, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Jude were done by the Revd J. W. Price.³ The final version was published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1915.

Smith formed a number of opinions about Bible translation. Early on he recognised that translations made by foreigners would always be provisional⁴ and should be superseded by those made by first language users. He accepted that his own work was temporary as indeed was his missionary work as a whole. He wrote to that effect in 1926: 'Missionaries are not a permanent factor in the life of Africa'⁵ and had followed his own principle by leaving the Africa mission in 1915.

When he worked for the Bible Society Smith explained that a Bible translation should be 'faithful to the original text; it must be intelligible to the reader for whom it is intended; and it must be beautiful in style'.⁶ He discussed these principle and pointed out that fidelity to the text cannot involve following the word order of the original, for languages vary in the way they arrange words to make sense; 'The translator must emancipate himself from the bondage of a soulless literalism.'⁷ He anticipated the dynamic equivalence method that the Bible Societies would adopt later as he declared 'We are to translate ideas rather than words.'⁸ Smith went on to become Editorial Superintendent of the BFBS and was responsible for the translations produced in the 1930. He was particularly concerned about the second of his three principles and in *The Shrine of a People's Soul* (1929) discussed the translation of idiomatic sayings and completely foreign concepts such as snow for dwellers on the Kafue flood plain. His solution for the latter was to use the word for a flock of white cattle egrets with which the local people were familiar. Smith argued that translators should be thoroughly conversant with the receptor language. For him immersion in a language was essential for a missionary – 'you have not mastered the rich, flexible, mellifluous African tongue until you can sit down and discuss things and gossip and joke with every and any individual of the tribe ...'⁹

³ Smith, E.W., *The Way of the White Fields in Rhodesia*, London: World Dominion Press, 1928, 109.

⁴ *Aldersgate Magazine*, 1911, 485ff.

⁵ Smith, E. W., *The Golden Stool*, London, Holborn Publishing House, 1926, 281.

⁶ Smith, E. W., *The Shrine of a People's Soul*, London: CMS, 1929, 152.

⁷ Smith, E. W., *The Shrine of a People's Soul*, London: CMS, 1929, 156.

⁸ Smith, E. W., *The Shrine of a People's Soul*, London: CMS, 1929, 157.

⁹ Smith, E.W., *Knowing the Africa*, London: Lutterworth, 1946, 43.

During the 1930s Smith investigated the possibility of translations that would be useful to new readers. This led him to experiment with simplified versions of English¹⁰ such as Basic English and he was involved in the Basic English Bible. At the close of his Bible Society career he made a long tour of India to review the position in Bible translation in India and Sri Lanka and to 'inquire and report ... as to the necessity, advisability and feasibility of producing simplified versions for the benefit of adults learning to read'.¹¹ After six months travel and interviewing missionaries, Indian Christians and eminent Indians such as Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore¹² he concluded that existing versions needed revision and there was need for simplified versions.¹³

Smith's involvement in Bible translation thus had two aspects. The first was as a practitioner of translation and the second was as a provider of support services for Bible translation. The latter role included editing the Bible Society's magazines and other literature such as annual reports as well as directing translation policy.

Anthropology

After a few years in Zambia Smith realised that language study needed supplementing by researches into the culture which the language expressed. With the help of his District Officer friend, Andrew Dale, he did extensive field work to help his understanding of Ila people. This drew him into the new social science of anthropology and as participant observers Smith and Dale left a model text in *The Ila Speaking peoples of Northern Rhodesia* (2 Vols, 1920). This work informed his own interactions with the Ila people and shows that Smith was active in approaching the Ila as fellow human beings who expressed life in their own way. As a missionary he brought change but was minded to make it as far as possible in harmony with the existing culture.

After leaving Africa Smith continued to be involved with anthropology and promoted its usefulness for missionaries in articles in the *International Review of Missions*,¹⁴ in books and in his first Presidential address to the Royal Anthropological Institute in

¹⁰ Examples of his rendering of John 1-6 in two simplified systems are found in Smith Papers, Bible Society Archives, Cambridge.

¹¹ Report on the Visit of the Editorial Superintendent (Rev E. Smith) to India and Ceylon, 1938-9, Smith Papers, Bible Society Archives, Cambridge.

¹² Accounts of this tour are found in the above report and in his diary also in the same archive. This has full accounts of his interviews and travels.

¹³ Report on the Visit of the Editorial Superintendent (Rev E. Smith) to India and Ceylon, 1938-9, Smith Papers, Bible Society Archives, Cambridge, 145-50.

¹⁴ 'Social Anthropology and Missionary Work'. *International Review of Missions*, October 1924, pp. 518-531.

1934, *Anthropology and the Practical Man*.¹⁵ He continued this emphasis in his Powell Lectures at the Canadian School of Missions in Toronto in 1940 where he addressed missionary candidates and missionaries on furlough. This was published as *Knowing the African* (1946). There Smith said 'Know your people' and stated that social anthropology would be a great help. He felt that he had missed out in his missionary preparation as there was little to help in those days but modern missionaries could benefit for 'The study of anthropology, as it is taught today, can be of immense service.'¹⁶ As he put it, 'Missionaries, administrators and others need to be endowed – or need to acquire – an anthropological mind'.¹⁷

African religions

Mission and anthropology came together as Smith thought about the significance of African religions. He produced useful studies of African religion long before it became a subject for serious academic recognition.¹⁸ These books¹⁹ provided essential information for missionaries and thoughtful students of religion. Smith's agenda did not end with providing an objective knowledge base for these people. His missionary agenda went on to consider the possibilities of using that knowledge as a point of contact which missionaries could develop creatively. He made his own attempt at this in *African Beliefs and Christian Faith* (1936) which was the forerunner of what is now known as African Christian Theology.²⁰ Smith's aim was for Christian thinking in Africa to be an African expression of faith rather than forcing Africans to accept unmodified European Christian traditions.

History and Biography

This by no means exhausts Smith's missionary literature. The 1920s saw biographical and historical articles in his Bible Society magazines. These provided inspirational material but the substantial biographies that followed were more scholarly and provided much historical and social background. His books on Robert Moffat, The Mabilles of Basutoland, Daniel Lindley and Robert Price were sympathetic studies but gave enough

¹⁵ *Anthropology and the Practical Man*. [Presidential address] Reprinted from the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, pp. xxxvii London [1934].

¹⁶ *Knowing the African* (1946), 47.

¹⁷ *Knowing the African* (1946), 35.

¹⁸ I discussed Smith's role here in "'They Have Laid Hold of Some Essential Truths"; Edwin W. Smith (1876-1957), A Wise Listener to Africans Voices' in *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*, Ludwig, F., and Adogame A., eds, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 197-205.

¹⁹ Chiefly, Smith E. W., *The Secret of the African*, London: SCM Press, 1929 and Smith E. W. (ed.), *African Ideas of God*, London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950.

²⁰ See Young, W. John, 'Edwin Smith: Pioneer explorer in African Christian Theology', *Epworth Review*, 1993, 80-88.

information to show how his subjects performed in terms of promoting the faith in appropriate cultural terms. His *Aggrey of Africa* (1929), one of his most popular books, described an African who had left a deep impression on Smith and many others.

Smith's historical work included the role of missionaries in race relations. In *The Blessed Missionaries* (1950), he showed how, as blessed nuisances, missionaries had contributed protest and education to the debate.

These historical and biographical works provided positive and negative examples to inspire, inform and improve missionary practice.

Mission Commentary

In other books Smith gave overviews of current situations with suggestions for the future. *The Golden Stool* (1926) was the printed version of his Hartley Lecture at the Primitive Methodist Conference. In it he directed his readers to Africa and offered a critical and sometimes hard hitting appraisal of Europe's role in Africa. It was possibly his most famous title and went through several reprints and was widely read by missionaries and administrators. *The Christian Mission in Africa* (1926) was Smith's report on the International Missionary Council on Africa held at Le Zoute in September 1926 and *The Way of the White Fields in Rhodesia* (1928) described the situation of missions in the two Rhodesias. The latter is remarkable for the amount of useful data that it contains.

Conclusion

Smith's colleagues in the Primitive Methodist Missions worked hard and did valuable work in West, South and Central Africa. So did other missionaries of all persuasions. They preached, taught, translated, organised and cared for the sick and needy. Some of their work was recorded in the printed word in reports and articles in church journals. Many of them wrote a book or two, chiefly of reminiscences, but for most the printed word was an occasional supplement to their practical work.²¹ This was not the case with Edwin Smith. For him practical work and the written word and its issue in print went hand in hand and he was very much at home in writing and publishing. He was among those for whom writing came so naturally that his work needed little revision and this gift was put to work to advocate the gospel of Christ in Africa and to encourage others in as many ways as he could. That he had gathered vast knowledge and wisdom in the process helped to make his work all the more valuable. A Hall of Fame of missionary

²¹ Among the Primitive Methodists an exception here would be C.P. Groves who, if not as prolific as Smith, wrote quite a lot including a four volume history of Christianity in Africa.

writers or writer/missionaries from all denominations would be deficient if it did not include Edwin W. Smith.

Bibliography

A full Bibliography of Edwin Smith's work is found in Young, W. John, *The Quiet Wise Spirit: Edwin W. Smith (1876-1957) and Africa*, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002.