

The Battlefield: a Mission field¹

Edwin W. Smith² on the Western Front, 1915

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Introduction

On 19 April 1915 Edwin and Julia Smith returned from Africa to a Britain now deeply involved in World War One.³ Three days later he attended the Primitive Methodist General Missionary Committee at Mansfield. The agenda included an urgent request for a chaplain to the forces and Smith indicated that he wanted to apply so was proposed and accepted.⁴

The Primitive Methodists (PMs) had a strong pacifist tradition and in 1913 Conference made a resolution on peace and in 1914 criticised the manufacture of arms.⁵ Yet shortly afterwards they were ‘in the war’⁶ perhaps, as Kendall suggested, persuaded by ‘reasons of the most compelling kind’.⁷ Whatever their reasoning, over the war years some 150,000 PMs were in the Forces and around 15,000 perished.⁸ Altogether, 59 ministers served as chaplains and 25 had been appointed by 1915.⁹ By

¹ The bulk of material for this paper is drawn from Edwin W. Smith’s diary for 1915 which covered the period April to September of that year. As ever I am indebted to his grandson, Richard Howard-Jones, for this valuable resource. All the unattributed quotations come from this source.

² On Edwin W Smith see Young, W. John, *The Quiet Wise Spirit: Edwin W. Smith (1876-1957) and Africa*, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002.

³ There is an enormous number of books on World War One. As a general guide I referred to Martin Gilbert, *First World War*, London: HarperCollins, 1995. Cooksey, Jon, *Images of War: Flanders – 1915, Rare Photographs from Wartime Archives*, Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2005, has numerous images of 1/5 York and Lancaster Regiment around Fleurbaix and Ypres along with commentary on their movements at the time Smith was with the 49th Division.

⁴ His attempts to join military groups in Africa had come to nothing. His collaborator in writing *The Ila-Speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia* cited as *ISP*, Captain A. M. Dale (1873-1919), had already returned to Britain and was commissioned with 10 KOYLI. Dale was invalided out of the army after being seriously wounded at Loos in September 1915. See Dale, Andrew Mapani, *The Little Bell Boy*, Lusaka, Zambia: ZPC Publications, 1998, 18-20 and *ISP Vol 1, x, xivf*, show that several of their colleagues were killed or wounded in WW1.

⁵ Kendall, H.B., *History of the Primitive Methodist Church*, London: Primitive Methodist Publishing House, 1919, 163.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁹ From analysis of the entries in Leary, W., *Directory of Primitive Methodist Ministers & their Circuits*, Loughborough: Teamprint, 1990; and Leary, W., *Supplement to Directory of Primitive Methodist Ministers & their Circuits*, Loughborough: Teamprint, 1993. P J Fisher (*Khaki Vignettes*) and R F Wearmouth (*Pages from a Padre’s Diary*) published material relating to their war chaplaincy experiences.

that time PM Chaplains had Government recognition through the creation of a United Board comprising Baptists, Congregationalists and Primitive Methodists.¹⁰

Two days after an interview at the War Office on 25th April (a Sunday) Smith heard of his acceptance and immediately signed agreements with the Missionary Committee and the War Office to be engaged for twelve months with the rank of Captain. Although passed fit medically he needed dental treatment which led to a delay as it involved extracting all his teeth and fitting dentures. He finally left for Le Havre via Southampton on 3 June and on the way he was encouraged by the Psalm for the day ‘The Lord is my rock and my fortress...’

June 1915: in France.

Smith was a few days at Le Havre mainly shadowing George Kendall, the PM Chaplain, who took him to the hospital where he heard one man say, ‘it’s not war but murder’. They held a service at the convalescent camp which was reached by means of a funicular railway and one evening he went with Mr Pochin, a wealthy Baptist, who ‘has devoted his time to cheering up the men in the camps and hospitals by giving them recitals’.

On Saturday 7 June he received his orders and set off that night by train to join the 49th Division (West Riding) which was on the Western Front near the Belgian border south of Armentières. Again he found a Psalm encouraging, ‘Commit thy way unto the Lord – Ps 37’. During the day they passed slowly through ‘smiling fields, haymaking, shocks of corn, fine woods:’ making it hard to realise that they were going to war. After another night he woke around 0430 on 9 June at the end of the line near Estaires and soon heard the ‘horrible’ sound of gunfire. On reporting at the Divisional HQ he learned that he would be with 1/2 Field Ambulance as part of the 147th Infantry Brigade.¹¹ He found his lodgings, met other officers and enjoyed an hour’s marching with them. The Wesleyan chaplain regarded the United Board as intruders on their territory but Smith liked him and they agreed to work together. Smith was not pleased to be billeted at the Hospital, about seven miles from the Brigade, for ‘it seems to me that my place is with the men. I shall have to go backwards and forwards and waste much time riding.’

¹⁰ Kendall, 1919, 167.

¹¹ <http://www.1914-1918.net/49div.htm> shows that the 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division had three Brigades, 146 (1/5th, 1/6th, 1/7th and 1/8th Prince of Wales, West Yorkshire), 147 (1/4th, 1/5th, 1/6th, and 1/7th Duke of Wellington’s West Riding) and 148 (1/4th Bn, the King's Own Yorkshire LI, and 1/5th King's Own Yorkshire LI, and 1/4th and 1/5th York & Lancaster Regiment). It also had Artillery and Engineers and the Royal Army Medical Corps with Field Ambulance and Ambulance to which Smith was attached. Smith would come across people from all these groupings especially WR, KOYLI and Y&L. He had served in Yorkshire in 1908-9 at Mexborough near Doncaster.

On Saturday 12 June he went by motor ambulance to Brigade HQ and then on horseback to the Front (around Fleurbaix) where he noted the layout of the trenches and the precautions needed in moving about. 'We left our horses and walked. Got into some trenches and dugouts. Found officers and men there. One battalion goes in for 6 days and then out.' After discussion with General Brereton he realised that big services were impossible at the Front and would soon find that there was also plenty for a chaplain to do away from the trenches.

On Sunday 13 June, a bright fine day, he took part in a parade service and preached on 'A credit to Christ'. The men went off for kit inspection and tobacco distribution but some returned for a 'very enjoyable' Holy Communion service at noon. Smith described these men as, 'Very intelligent, fine fellows'. After some time in the afternoon in the Convalescent camp he concluded; 'Must give them much of my time. They need cheering up.' There were sad cases of nervous breakdown and shell shock who sat brooding in the Camp. One declared that he would blow his brains out rather than return to the trenches. Smith discussed this with the doctors who said this was a new thing. It couldn't be explained medically but was recognised as distinct from cowardice.¹²

Most of those who attended a voluntary evening service sang well and had New Testaments; others accepted the ones he offered and they read John 21 which Smith expounded. The Sergeant Major thought that a piano would be a great help and Smith suggested this later to the Colonel who agreed to the request but a sceptical sergeant remarked that Smith would be the most popular man in the unit if one turned up.

Things were more serious when, two days later, on Tuesday 15th June he arrived at 147th Brigade HQ to be told, 'you're just in time to see some fun.' There was a cry 'Here's another'; they sprang into a shelter and heard a loud bang from down the road. Smith was told that he would be killed if he went down the road. The Germans were retaliating after night time shelling from the British and about 200 shells including some 70 high explosive ones came over. Two farms had been destroyed and Smith wrote, 'Another bang and a farm about 100 yards off burst into flames. Presently saw some of the men coming supporting a woman who had been in the house. Another bang and one of the men picked up a big hot fragment that fell in the HQ yard about 10 yards from us.' Smith found that there were 99 men from his Nonconformist denominations¹³ and then was shaken by a shell that fell nearby. The

¹² Smith actually wrote 'funk', a word in common use in those days.

¹³ Smith found that in Battalions 4, 5, 6, & 7 there were 352 Wesleyans, 99 men from the UB churches, including 6 PMs; also 3117 C of E and 191 RCs. The 59:1 ratio of Wesleyans to PMs suggests at this stage PMs were in the main following their pacifist instincts.

HQ staff said it was their worst bombardment so far. One officer had been holed up in a ditch for two hours while shells fell all around him.

On Friday 18th June he had the unpleasant task of censoring letters. This would become one of his regular duties; ‘A nasty job, one feels horribly mean reading other men’s letters, to wives and girls but it has to be done. Everyone [sic] must be glanced through in case they are giving anything away’. It gave him an insight into ‘Tommy’s mind’: cheerful, keeping bad news from his mother, not sentimental in love affairs, hoping all would turn out right.

There were signs of spiritual need among the soldiers in their desperate situation. One group said ‘they have had no chaplain since they came out 9 weeks ago’ and their Captain said, ‘If anything in religion they want it now: ready to hear.’ Smith would report to the Bible Society that for many ‘there has now come a new determination and a desire to serve the living God’.¹⁴

Visiting the wounded in hospitals and dressing stations was a significant part of his work so he came across men from other Brigades. On Thursday 24 June he had seen badly wounded men and two PMs. One young man from the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI), i.e. in 148 Brigade, said that they had a meeting of their own and prayers every night.

Plans were then made to move the Division about 15-20 miles NW to the Ypres area in Belgium and as they prepared other brigades passed through and Smith was impressed by the Canadian Scottish who went by marching with a swing to bagpipe accompaniment: ‘It’s a brave sight but makes me sad rather to think how few of these men will ever see home again.’

July and August: in Belgium, near Ypres.

The Front in Belgium had seen very heavy fighting during the second battle of Ypres (April/May 1915) in which gas had been used for the first time. Things were quieter when the 49th Division arrived but there was still plenty of action as Smith would find. Setting off on Tuesday evening 29th June he ‘fell in for our march ... Men go first, Colonel at head, each company with officers. Then wagons: stretcher bearers, chaplains and second officers in [the] rear.’ By the following evening they had reached Watou. ‘Many men had to fall out tired: they are soft after weeks in the trenches.’

Things were unsettled for a few days. He cycled around to find the various battalions and arranged and held Sunday services. General Plumer inspected the

¹⁴ *The Bible in the World*, 1916, p. 112

Brigades¹⁵ and there was cricket and an impromptu concert before some of the troops set off for the Front¹⁶ on the evening of Wednesday, 7th July; Smith wondered how many he would see again.

By Saturday, 10th July, he saw a few patients at the hospital but was fed up, ‘Other people all at work. I seem to be doing nothing. Wished fervently I had never come to the war.’ Then, in the evening he went to the Field Hospital, ‘Went in and found them busy and at once my ennui fled. Here [was] work to do.’ The surgeons were operating and Smith ministered to men in the recovery area. A man he had seen on the operating table started to come round and recognised him from the previous Sunday; ‘company sergeant – fine, smart fellow... Now had arm blown off by a shell.’ In the evening he was needlessly called to bury an officer. The Colonel accompanied him on ‘A weird drive thro’ Elverdinghe – in dim light and saw buildings in ruin: hardly one escaped.’ At HQ they found that the man had already been buried and it was too ‘hot’ to go on. General Brereton thanked him for coming and they stumbled out in the darkness and lost their way for a time. A bullet fell nearby but they reached their car and returned safely to everyone’s relief. Smith wrote ‘I hate the war – loathe it – curse it – for its cruelty.’

Monday 12th July. He went round the wards after breakfast. A young lieutenant (Hobson) was unconscious and dying from serious neck wounds. Another man was badly wounded in the stomach and asked him to pray and ‘if I would tell him honestly whether he would recover: I had to tell him that he was very bad, but had a chance.’ He spent the rest of the morning censoring letters and supervising work in the cemetery. After visiting the Divisional HQ in a beautiful Chateau (presumably Elverdinghe) he returned to the hospital. Several men had been buried, including a Congregational lad from Swinton.¹⁷ In the evening he was taken on another fool’s errand to bury a man who had died at the dressing outpost; again he found the man had been buried already. Bullets were flying around as they returned with some wounded soldiers and news came in of the death of Lieutenant Hobson.

On Wednesday 14 July Private Lane, the man with a stomach injury died. Smith had seen him in the night and spoke from Psalm 23 which the man valued and said every day. ‘This war is sheer madness’ said Smith. At 2.30 he took the funeral of

¹⁵ See also Cooksey, Jon, *Images of War: Flanders – 1915, Rare Photographs from Wartime Archives*, Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2005, 78.

¹⁶ The Division occupied the northernmost section of British trenches around Boesinge.

¹⁷ Swinton. Smith had spent a few months during 1908-9 in the Mexborough Circuit and one of his churches was in Swinton.

Lt Hobson.¹⁸ Other funerals would follow; Private Lane of the York & Lancaster Regiment (Y&L) on Thursday 15 July and two more on Friday 16 July.

Over the next few days he would hear of ‘men who pray in the trenches’ (17th), of a Local Preacher and Salvationist who preached in the companies (20th). He gave out more NTs and on 20th ‘One lad took his N.T. out of pocket and showed it partially perforated by a bullet. It had saved his life.’ He preached (18th) on ‘Keeping Lines of Communication’ to several units including men from 1/7 WR who would go to the trenches that night. Some were wounded and he met them next day (Monday 19th) at the hospital. They said how much they liked his service but he heard that several had been killed.

On Wednesday 21st July the wood was shelled in the morning but there were no casualties. It was very upsetting learn that a man to whom he had spoken the previous day had shot himself in the night. ‘I feel if I had talked to him more I might have kept him from it.’

Friday 23rd July. Some wounded came in at lunch time and he went to one man on the operating table. ‘Was squirming about. I took hold of his hands. He looked up at me. “Parson, you came to preach to us at Fleurbaix”... His face covered with dry blood: head bandaged. Bowels protruding from wound in stomach. Other wound in thigh. Arms also. He kept pleading: “Put me to sleep”. [The] Colonel came and operated but in vain. They gave him 2 hours. He was only partly conscious.’ Smith asked if he had any message and the man said he loved his mother and ‘I have paid well for my country’. Smith ‘Asked him if he trusted in Christ. Said “Yes”.’ Smith stayed with him until he died, then looked through his papers, found a letter to his sister and wrote to her.¹⁹

Monday 26th July. He went round the hospital then ‘After dinner, burial of Sergeant Walker.²⁰ Comrades to funeral. These processions always sad – the parson, then 4 men with stretcher: then others behind. Two of his brothers there.’ One of the

¹⁸ From Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC): HOBSON, LESLIE FABER: Second Lieutenant: York and Lancaster Regiment: 4th Bn. Age: 19. Date of Death: 12/07/1915. Son of Albert John and Maud Hobson, of Kinloch, Beckenham, Kent, late of Esholt, Sheffield. Commonwealth War Dead Grave/Memorial Reference: Plot 1. Row I. Grave 2. Cemetery: FERME-OLIVIER CEMETERY

¹⁹ From CWGC: HALSTED, JOHN: Private, Duke of Wellington's (West Riding Regiment): 1st/6th Bn. Age: 24 Date of Death: 22/07/1915 Service No: 2385. Son of John Archibald and Alice Halsted, of 22 Arkwright Street, Burnley, Lancashire: Commonwealth War Dead Grave/Memorial Reference: Plot 1. Row I. Grave 4. Cemetery: FERME-OLIVIER CEMETERY.

²⁰ From CWGC: WALKER, CHARLES: Serjeant: York and Lancaster Regiment: 1st/4th Bn. Age: 36 Date of Death: 26/07/1915 Service No: 87: Husband of Mary Walker, of 56, Edward Street, Sheffield: Commonwealth War Dead Grave/Memorial Reference: Plot 1. Row I. Grave 5: FERME-OLIVIER CEMETERY

mourners, Sergeant Moffatt, converted in the Bethel PM church, Sheffield, asked Smith to take communion with his unit and he held the service the next day in Elverdinghe wood with 15 Nonconformists in the 4th Y&L on Tuesday.

Friday 30th July he reported that Thursday had been busy. There had been much firing and many wounded on Wednesday night. ‘One man shot through the stomach: doctors gave him 24 hours. When I saw him he didn’t know: had to prepare him.’ They moved the ambulance to the HQ where he slept in the horse ambulance car on a cold night before organising a tent and making a bed from a stretcher and some boxes. There were 14 staff and he visited patients in tents and a barn. The previous day a German plane had dropped bombs near them ‘Dived for safety and fell into barbed wire.’

Saturday 31st July. Overnight, a few miles to the SE, there was there was a big ‘bombardment in the direction of Hooge. We hear today there were 2,000 casualties last night. Germans used some burning fluid and drove us out of our front trench.’ He and Mullins, a Roman Catholic chaplain he had palled up with went out on horseback arranging Sunday services and back at the cemetery²¹ graves were being dug in readiness. ‘Men are angry about it. They go to the sergeant in charge of the party and say: Who is this for? And when they hear for nobody they swear. “Pity the poor bugger it is for.” As if digging the grave would cause his death.’ In the wood the guards were digging a tremendous lot of trenches. Smith was ‘unutterably sick of the whole business.’ At 9 p.m. some guns were firing from the nearby French lines. It built up to ‘One continuous row. Hundreds – thousands of men being hurled into eternity this night.’

At the beginning of August he arranged to take turns with Pattinson, the C of E Chaplain, in visiting the hospital. However, he was unwell for several days with rheumatism and lumbago but by Monday 9th August reported that it had been an eventful week. The previous night ‘At 6.30 our guns began’. About 40 wounded were brought in and he heard that there was a ¾mile advance on a 3 mile front. The Germans in their turn fired 14 inch shells which landed nearby and left huge holes.

By Tuesday 10th Pattinson was transferred and Smith took over until a replacement came. Seven of the Nonconformists were in the hospital and he buried the remains of Sergeant Staveley of 5 KOYLI who had been killed by a shell.²² On Thursday he arranged some home leave from 18th.

²¹ From the burial records noted elsewhere this was most probably the Ferme-Olivier Cemetery. Work at the cemetery was another of Smith’s regular tasks.

²² From CWGC, 10/8/15 STAVELEY J W, Serjeant: King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry: 1st/5th Bn. Age: 27 Date of Death: 10/08/1915, Service No: 1361: Son of John and Elizabeth Staveley, of Bawtry,

Friday 13th August was the 17th Anniversary of his sailing for Africa. He had been ‘called up in the night to see a lad named Otter, from Wath on Dearne, very seriously wounded. They had given up hope for him. He didn’t realise it: I told him and prayed. In the morning saw him again: stench from him sickening. Still didn’t realise. When I went back, found they had shifted him.’²³ As Smith went about arranging Sunday services he came across farmers harvesting their wheat. ‘Very peaceful scene.’ He also met Sir John French²⁴ who asked about the sick.

Sunday (15th) had been ‘a full day.’ Page, the new Anglican chaplain took some funerals and Smith took Page’s service with 5WR and ‘read the Church prayers and preached. Adjutant thanked me with tears in his eyes: I was just going off when they came to say that the Wesleyans were ready for their service’ so he preached to them on ‘What [must I] do to be saved?’ and many responded to his invitation to stay for communion. These men went to the trenches that evening and some were wounded as they went in. Smith was called up in the night to see a lad who had been shot in the liver.

Leave and after.

After a delightful time on leave with his wife and daughter (18th -28th August) he found on return that he was being transferred and went by train to Rouen via Boulogne for his new appointment which turned out to be with 27 & 28 Light Infantry Base Depots. There were ten hospitals and many camps with men passing through to the Front. He and Rev G M Rice of the United Board had to find and minister to their people everywhere and found the Anglicans and Wesleyans were less cooperative than at the Front where necessity forced denominational interests on to the back foot. For example they suggested to the Wesleyan chaplain ‘that we would work together and make a Circuit of all the Camps but he would not. I hate these rivalries, and would rather work with them than in antagonism – but if they won’t join it we will take our own course.’

Smith’s diary closed on Wednesday 8th September. His poor health meant that he was invalided from the Front and by November was in Maidstone ‘for less

Yorkshire: Commonwealth War Dead Grave/Memorial Reference: Plot 1. Row H. Grave 9. Cemetery: [FERME-OLIVIER CEMETERY](#).

²³ From CWGC: OTTER, W: Private: York and Lancaster Regiment: 1st/5th Bn. Date of Death: 13/08/1915 Service No: 1975 Casualty Type: Commonwealth War Dead Grave/Memorial Reference: III. D. 28. Cemetery: [LIJSSENTHOEK MILITARY CEMETERY](#)

²⁴ Sir John French was the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force.

strenuous service for a time.²⁵ It is likely that diabetes then came into the picture²⁶ and that was bad news because insulin treatment did not begin until the 1920s though dietary control was possible. Although less strenuous, this work kept him occupied and he was unable to revise his Ila-Speaking Peoples manuscript for the publishers because his duties were ‘somewhat absorbing’.²⁷ Nor could his friend, Dale, who had been seriously injured at Loos and was lying in hospital in London.²⁸

Eventually Smith’s year with the Army finished and he went to Italy with the British and Foreign Bible Society.

As reported above Smith was very disillusioned by the War. It showed the so-called civilised nations in a very bad light as Smith would point out in his famous book, *The Golden Stool* (1926). He had been with reputedly savage people in Central Africa but the Great War for Civilisation as it was termed on Victory medals demonstrated that the really savage tribes were in Europe all the time. The War also challenged theology for the liberal and optimistic assumptions of that period were seriously threatened. I discuss this in my book on Smith, *The Quiet Wise Spirit* (pp 96-98). After his army service Smith went to Italy with the British and Foreign Bible Society. There he came across Dante and the poet’s approach resonated with his own thinking for Dante, in his day, combined human knowledge and divine revelation in his masterwork *The Divine Comedy*. Smith went about theology by blending human knowledge, especially derived from anthropology, with Christ in the Bible interpreted in the light of scholarship.

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²⁵ EWS to Macmillans, 23 November, 1915, Macmillan Archives, Reading.

²⁶ See McVeigh, M, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity*, Cape Cod, Mass.: Claude Starke, 1974, 2.

²⁷ EWS to Macmillans, 15 December, 1915, Macmillan Archives, Reading.

²⁸ Ibid.

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