

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P., Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# LIFE AND TIMES

OF

## THE RIGHT HON. W. H. SMITH.

### CHAPTER I.

1784-1846.

INTRODUCTORY—THE BROTHERS SMITH—THEIR PARENTAGE—  
THE HOUSE IN DUKE STREET—THEY SET UP A BRANCH  
OFFICE IN THE STRAND—THE JUNIOR PARTNER BUYS OUT  
HIS BROTHER—LETTER FROM LEIGH HUNT—BIRTH OF A  
SON, WILLIAM HENRY—HIS BOYHOOD—GOES TO TAVISTOCK  
GRAMMAR-SCHOOL—HIS AVERSION TO METHODISM—DESIRES  
TO ENTER HOLY ORDERS—DEFERS TO HIS FATHER'S WISHES  
AND ENTERS THE BUSINESS—HIS INDIFFERENCE TO GAMES  
AND HIS LOVE OF MUSIC—CORRESPONDENCE WITH WILLIAM  
INCE.

NOT very long before the following pages began  
to be penned, Sir Charles Bowen commented with  
caustic good humour on what he termed the

VOL. I.

A

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P., Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

growing tendency of the age to write ponderous biographies of Nobody.

It must always be a matter of opinion to what exact degree of eminence a man should rise above the mean level of character, or what store of achievement it should be possible to lay to his account, before the public are invited to the perusal of his biography.

“ Oh ! vain attempt to give a deathless lot  
To names ignoble, born to be forgot.”

There is an ominous sentence in one of Horace Walpole's letters : “ One can never talk very long about folks that are merely excellent—I mean, unless they do not deserve it, and then their flatterers can hold forth upon their virtues by the hour.” The affection of his family—the predilection of his friends—the gratitude of those whom he may have benefited—the admiration of humbler men from among whom he may have raised himself—the success with which Fortune, so partial in her favours, so indifferent to merit, may have filled his sails,—all these have to be liberally discounted before the figure of a public man can be viewed in the just perspective essential to critical narrative.

But when such a man has brought his life out of a surrounding no more than commonplace,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P, Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*SCOPE OF HIS CAREER.*

3

when he has conducted an ordinary commercial undertaking to a position beyond competition, and then, having accomplished what would satisfy most men as a life's work, has set himself to political enterprise, and, by sheer dint of the esteem awarded, not to audacity or surpassing powers of speech, but to unselfish integrity and faultless common-sense, has risen from one office of trust to another, till his party at a moment of extreme perplexity, by an involuntary and common impulse, turned towards him and laid upon him the hazardous duties of leader,—when a man has set his hand to so much and succeeded in every step of his career, in such a life there cannot fail to be much that is worthy of record, much that will be of service for the guidance and encouragement of others.

It is this feeling which has actuated the writer of the following Memoirs: there has been also the additional motive of warm personal regard towards the subject of them, and gratitude for unvarying kindness. It is difficult, in dealing with the actions and character of one lately departed, to avoid undue eulogy and to keep in right proportion incidents of private life which, however much their memory may be cherished by relatives and intimate friends, cannot be ex-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P., Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

pected to occupy the interest of general readers. The object, therefore, has been ἀληθευεῖν ἐν ἀγάπῃ — affectionately to tell the truth; to state impartially the origin and incidents of a life which rose from circumstances of comparative obscurity to those of distinction and responsibility; to show the qualities and principles which secured for William Henry Smith the unbounded confidence of those who were associated with him, and the ungrudging respect of those who, in public life, were opposed to him.

---

In the primitive community, while the use of metals was still limited and the craft of working them was known only to a few, he who possessed it became the most important person in the village to those whose business it was to maintain life by implements, or defend it by weapons of iron. Hence in every such society the smith, or worker in iron, became a central figure, and hence the frequency with which, when surnames became fixed, that of Smith established itself in every part of our land where English was spoken. As society became more complex under the feudal system, the smith, or he who wrought, took a lower place in the social scale than the *hláford*—lord, or he who gave loaves: the seller, instead

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P, Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HIS GRANDFATHER.

5

of being all-important to the buyer, became dependent on his favour. But inasmuch as metal work is necessary to every branch of industry, and the humblest hamlet possessed its forge, so it has come to pass that Smith is the commonest surname among our people, and to trace the lineage of one of that name, upon whose descent obscurity has fallen, is almost as hopeless a task as can be set to the genealogist.<sup>1</sup>

Of Henry Walton Smith, who towards the close of the eighteenth century came to London from Devonshire, it has not been possible to ascertain the parentage, although inquiries have been made and renewed by his descendants at intervals between the years 1844 and 1887. It is said that he was educated at Harrow, and it is known that by his marriage he gave deep offence to his family, who seem thereafter to have withdrawn all countenance from him.<sup>2</sup> His wife's name was Anna

<sup>1</sup> Various degrees of importance are attached to patronymics by different people. Sydney Smith, on being asked who was his grandfather, replied, "I know something about my father, because I remember him, but of my grandfather I know nothing, except that he disappeared about the time of York assizes." On the other hand, it is told of the late Lord Chelmsford, an exceedingly dignified individual, that while he was still Sir Frederick Thesiger, he was one day accosted in the street by somebody who mistook him for an acquaintance and addressed him as "Smith," upon which Sir Frederick drew himself up and said, with awful *hauteur*, "Sir, do I look like a person of the name of Smith?"

<sup>2</sup> The following memorandum, apparently written about the year

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P, Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Eastaugh, to whom he was married at Christ Church, Middlesex, on October 27, 1784. That the bride was of humble parentage is apparent from the fact that, instead of signing the register, she appended her mark X to it. They had three children, the youngest of whom, William Henry, was born in 1792. Very shortly after the birth of this child, the father died, aged about thirty-five, and his widow would never in after-years tell her children anything about their father's family, except that, from the time of his death, she never received either help or notice from them. The only fragments of correspondence by Henry Walton Smith which remain, are portions of letters to his sweetheart, afterwards his wife

1841, is in the handwriting of his youngest son, William Henry Smith, senior :—

“My father's name was Henry Walton Smith. His father was an officer in the Navy. Henry Walton Smith died in August 1792, when I was a few days old, since which time I know nothing of his family.”

This seems to have been written for the information of his son (the subject of this Memoir), who at this early age (sixteen) had already begun those endeavours to trace the origin of his family which he continued to within a few years of his death. In 1841 he received a letter from his father :—

“I do not think it worth while troubling ourselves about the old Family Arms: the Herald Office would require me to prove my right to use them, which I cannot do, through the circumstance of my Father having quitted this life while I was only a few days old. If I should ever happen to be at or near Wrrington, I might make enquiries,—it is a matter of such very little consequence that I do not wish enquiries to be made.”

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P, Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*THE BROTHERS SMITH.*

7

— “dearest Anna,” “my Nanny,” and “my dearest Nanny”—written in most affectionate terms, but referring also to circumstances of grief and perplexity in which he found himself, the nature of which is not explained, though it was probably of a pecuniary kind. In one of these letters he desires his wife to send him another volume of ‘Pamela.’ Having no independent means, Henry Smith and his wife were forced to separate shortly after their marriage; he entered the service of one Mr Rogers, and she lived with a Mrs Brown at 96 Watling Street, London. From Richmond, Smith writes a desponding letter, of which the only date is “Sat. morning, 3 o’clock.”

. . . Mr Rogers is in a state that would alarm a stronger mind than mine. I have been up with him ever since we have been here, and I believe his stay in this variegated life is of very short duration. The melancholy situation in which he lies makes nature shudder, and at the same time tells me the miserable state of man. . . . I cannot say I am well; if I did it would be flatt’ring myself too much, therefore if anything should happen it will only rid you of a troublesome fellow and make you once more easy; and then perhaps you may form connexions with one who will better deserve your esteem. . . . Our Lives are in the hand of an all wise Creator, and he will dispose of them as seemeth best.

Somewhere within the first quarter of the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P., Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

present century, the brothers Henry Edward and William Henry Smith, sons of Henry Walton Smith, set up the business of “newsmen,” as it was then termed, in an unpretending shop in Duke Street, Grosvenor Square. Probably there was nothing to distinguish it from dozens of other houses doing a similar business—nothing to mark it as the source of what has grown into an important tributary of the Pactolus of British trade. In those days penny and halfpenny dailies may, indeed, have been somebody’s dream, but one not more likely to be realised than any other dream. Besides the paper tax, there was the duty imposed on each copy of every newspaper: the sheets, before going through the press, had all to be sent to Somerset House to receive the official stamp. There was also the advertisement-tax, payable by the publisher.<sup>1</sup>

But in spite of these restrictions, the business of Messrs Smith prospered and increased, so that it became desirable to secure premises near the offices of the principal newspapers. About the year 1820 the house 192 Strand was purchased, and formed into a branch office, the head office remaining in Duke Street.

<sup>1</sup> The practice of withholding information as to the price of books under review in magazines or journals originated in the intention of avoiding the tax on advertisements.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P, Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Now the partners in this firm were of very different degrees of capacity, and the younger brother, William, soon found that, as the scope of their transactions extended, so the necessity for organisation and punctuality increased. Henry, the elder, was old-fashioned, and, in truth, somewhat dilatory. Part of his duty was to prepare the addresses for country parcels at the Duke Street office; these were then sent off to the Strand, where William attended to their despatch by the mails. Many a time the neighbours used to see the younger brother running out in his shirt-sleeves into the Strand, watch in hand, looking impatiently for the lingering messenger, before whose arrival the day's papers could not be sent off, and exclaiming, "What *is* that lazy brother of mine about?"

At last the situation became intolerable. Punctuality was the very soul of the business, and punctuality was just what the senior partner could not contribute; so an arrangement was made by which William Henry became sole proprietor of the concern.<sup>1</sup> Sole proprietor and sole manager, also, in every sense of the word. He was no believer in delegated authority or subdivision of responsibility. He worked as hard as any apprentice in the daily, manual

<sup>1</sup> Henry Edward Smith died in 1846.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00923-2 - Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith,  
M.P, Volume 1

Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

labour, being noted as the quickest packer in the establishment. He prided himself on this, and it was a standing rule that any lad who could pack up a greater number of newspapers than his master in the morning was entitled to a gratuity of a shilling. Indefatigable himself, he was intolerant of anything short of the utmost exactitude in others; he was relentless in reproof of negligence, and so stern in dealing with any shortcoming that, as is a common experience, his presence had an effect the reverse of inspiring on his staff. Nevertheless, to use the expressive phrase of one who knew him well, and still occupies a position of trust in the firm, he brought the business up to that point beyond which it could not be taken by a single individual.

It was an arduous, unremitting life that was required in those early days of one who would succeed in the trade of newsman. Competition was keen and profits so small that success could only be attained by constant watchfulness to make use of every opportunity to extend the business. The trade of disseminating literature contains branches which are not all drudgery. A publisher's profession, for instance, implies plenty of hard work, and a keen sense of the public taste; but it also means something akin to leisure, enriched by literary occupation. But an active