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 Smith, M.P, Volume 2
 Herbert Eustace Maxwell
 Excerpt
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LIFE AND TIMES

OF

THE RIGHT HON. W. H. SMITH.



CHAPTER I.

1878–1880.

WAR WITH AFGHANISTAN—MOTION OF CENSURE ON MINISTERS—
 DEPRESSION OF TRADE—THE ZULU WAR—MEETING OF PARLIAM-
 ENT—FIFTH MOTION OF CENSURE WITHIN TWELVE
 MONTHS—MR BUTT RESIGNS LEAD OF HOME RULE PARTY
 —IS SUCCEEDED BY MR PARNELL—IRISH TACTICS IN PARLIA-
 MENT—SPEECH BY SMITH AT BURY ST EDMUNDS—HE RE-
 CEIVES DEGREE OF D.C.L. AT OXFORD—THE NEW EDDYSTONE
 LIGHTHOUSE—RENEWAL OF WAR WITH AFGHANISTAN—LORD
 HARTINGTON ON HOME RULE—DISPUTE WITH TURKEY—
 AGRARIAN AGITATION IN IRELAND—BY-ELECTIONS AT LIVER-
 POOL AND SOUTHWARK—MEETING OF PARLIAMENT—DEBATE
 ON IRISH DISTRESS—DISSOLUTION OF PARLIAMENT—LORD
 BEACONSFIELD'S MANIFESTO—LORD DERBY JOINS THE LIBERALS
 —SMITH IS RE-ELECTED FOR WESTMINSTER.

By the time that Smith returned to England
 from the East, war had been declared with

VOL. II.

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Afghanistan, and Parliament was summoned to meet on 5th December. For the fourth time during 1878 the Government were to be arraigned on a motion of censure—this time moved by Mr Whitbread—and the House was to be called on to declare that it disapproved of the policy which had led to hostilities; for the fourth time the attack was to be repulsed: the Government obtained a majority of 101 in a House of 555 members.

During the holidays an event took place which was the cause of much rejoicing in the family at Greenlands. On January 2, Miss Leach, the daughter of Mrs Smith by her former marriage, was wedded to Captain W. Codrington, R.N.

Smith's only son, Frederick, who had lately gone to school, was home at this time for the Christmas holidays, and told a funny little story about his experience. The boys had asked him if his father was the man who had the bookstalls, to which he answered, "Yes." Then they asked him if he did anything else. "Oh yes," replied Frederick, "he's First Lord of the Admiralty!"—a statement which was received with shouts of incredulous derision.

Although the shadow of war no longer lay upon the land (for the affair in Afghanistan, though serious and deplorable enough, was very

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

A.D. 1879.]

THE ZULU WAR.

3

light compared with the mighty conflict into which Britain had so nearly been drawn in the year that was past), the gloom of commercial depression, which had set in with the crash of the City of Glasgow Bank in September, weighed heavily on all classes. Agriculture especially was in a languishing state: the pressure of competition in corn and meat had begun to be formidable about two years previously, and for the first time the effect of one-sided free trade was making itself felt upon our principal industry—in addition to which the harvest of 1878 had been a disastrous one. On the back of all this came news of another frontier war in which Great Britain had become involved, this time in South Africa, with Cetchwayo, King of the Zulus. Not much interest was taken in it by people in this country, absorbed as they were in their private anxieties, until, on February 11, arrived messages describing the terrible calamity at Isandhlwana, where the English column under Colonel Glyn had been cut to pieces.

It was under such circumstances as these that Ministers met Parliament on February 13. The glow of exultation which had followed the return of our Plenipotentiaries from Berlin had given place to cold disapproval and anger at the humiliation of our arms by a tribe of savages.

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Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

LIFE OF W. H. SMITH.

[ÆT. 53.]

Notwithstanding all this, the House of Commons still, though with a diminished majority, ratified the conduct of the Government, and rejected a vote of censure (the fifth within twelve months), moved by Sir Charles Dilke, by a majority of 60.

The programme of legislation for the session was not an ambitious one. Much time was taken up discussing new rules of procedure, rendered necessary by the systematic obstruction persisted in by the Irish Nationalist members. Such schemes and discussion of such rules have become familiar of late years in the House of Commons: as each fresh device for paralysing business has been invented, some expedient has had to be found to defeat it. The Mother of Parliaments has too often presented the similitude of a pack of angry schoolboys wasting the hours allowed them for play in squabbling over the rules of the game. On this occasion Mr Joseph Cowen pertinently reminded the Government that they were probably wasting more hours in debating the acceleration of business than they could hope to gain by improved rules of procedure.

The Home Rulers were not slow to turn the circumstances of the day to practical account.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

A.D. 1879.] *THE POLICY OF THE PARNELLITES.* 5

Agricultural distress, low prices, and the ruin of the crops were availed of to foment political discontent, and Parnell lent the full weight of his new authority to the anti-rent agitation.

For Parnell was now leader of the Home Rule party. In the previous session, a debate had taken place on the occasion of the murder of Lord Leitrim, during which the line taken by Messrs Parnell, Biggar, O'Donnell, and Callan, the accusations made and the language used by them, were made the subject of remonstrance and disclaimer by their nominal chief, Mr Butt, who, when he found that he had lost control over his followers, resigned the leadership. Henceforward the policy of Irish Nationalist representatives was to be that of sparing no charge, however odious and unfounded, of respecting no custom or tradition of Parliament, however venerable and honourable, with the intention of making their presence at Westminster intolerable to the House of Commons, and incompatible with its use as a legislative assembly.

During the Whitsuntide recess, it fell to the First Lord of the Admiralty to make an important speech at Bury St Edmunds—important, not because it marked an era in oratory or gave birth to any of those phrases with which it is the

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[More information](#)

happy knack of some public men to tickle the fancy of the public, but important because of the reassuring effect it had upon the general anxiety which prevailed. The war in Afghanistan had been brought to an end, and a treaty of peace entered into with the Ameer. Sir Garnet Wolseley had been sent out to South Africa in order, as Smith expressed it—

To conduct the war wisely, with moderation, with a proper desire to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, and with the resolution to bring it to a speedy and safe conclusion. We should be wanting in our duty to our country and to Englishmen in other parts of the world if we failed to see that the peace which is to follow should be one which is not to be again disturbed.

Now these were simple expressions, verging, it might be thought, on commonplace: what was it that gave them so much weight? It was that people had learned already to rely on the sound sense, courage, and moderation of the speaker, and this is confirmed by some passages in an article in the Liberal ‘Spectator’ of June 14, 1879, entitled, “A Smith Administration” :—

We read Mr Smith’s unpretentious and straightforward speech with a great deal more pleasure than we had felt in Lord Cranbrook’s. . . . A sense of peace settles down upon one in reading one of the speeches of the First Lord of the Admiralty, a sense of peace to which, when Lord Beaconsfield, or Lord Salisbury, or Lord Cranbrook speaks,

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Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)A.D. 1879.] *THE 'SPECTATOR' ON MR SMITH.* 7

one is quite a stranger. . . . As we hear his judicious sentences, as we hear him say that he and his party want no violent political changes—that what they desire is “practical improvement of our laws,” of a nature to “increase the welfare and prosperity of the country”—we cannot help crying out to ourselves, “Oh for an Administration of such men as these when Conservatives are in the ascendant! . . . Why are we always to be ruled over by the Tory wild cattle, and never by the pacific and moderate, even, if you like to call them so, tame statesmen, who best represent the genuine aspirations of the opulent merchant, the sagacious banker, the benevolent country rector, the cheerful squire, and the bland physician? . . . If the country likes a little political sleep—and at times clearly it does like a little political sleep, for we have always agreed with Mr W. H. Smith that the Conservative working man is by no means a fiction of Conservative brains, but as genuine a fact as the Conservative shopkeeper or the Conservative landowner—why should it not take its rest under a quiet Administration such as Mr Smith, and Ministers like Mr Smith, would give us? What we would fain see for a time—as long as the languid mood lasts in the country—is a Smith Administration, an Administration, that is to say, of men of good sense and good feeling; by profession, modest and elderly; by habit, judicious; by principle, upright; dreading levity and abhorring brag.

. . . Under such an Administration we might have, under the Right Hon. W. H. Smith as First Lord of the Treasury, Lord Winmarleigh (better known as Colonel Wilson Patten) for President of the Council, Sir Hardinge Giffard for Lord Chancellor, the Duke of Northumberland for Foreign Secretary, Earl Beauchamp for Privy Seal, Lord Ravensworth for President of the Board of Trade,

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[More information](#)

Lord Napier of Magdala for Secretary at War, Mr Algernon Egerton for First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr Cross for Home Secretary (on condition he indulged in no more Russophobic panics), Mr Stanhope for Secretary for India, Sir Henry Holland for Secretary for the Colonies, Mr Sclater-Booth for President of the Local Government Board, and Sir H. Selwin-Ibbetson for Chancellor of the Exchequer.

It is rather over than under the average proportion of hits to misses in political prophecies that, out of the thirteen posts thus filled up, while Mr Cross and Mr Sclater-Booth were already in the offices assigned to them, three others—the first, third, and eleventh—were ultimately occupied by the persons mentioned as fitted for them.

A few days after his speech at Bury St Edmunds, Smith went to Oxford to receive the honorary degree of D.C.L., which the University is wont to confer on men who rise to distinction. Professor Bryce,¹ to whom, as Regius Professor of Civil Law, was assigned the duty of introducing the candidates in a Latin speech, described the First Lord of the Admiralty as one “whose fleets covered the sea and his newspapers the land; one to whom Britain had committed her trident, and one who had succeeded not only in

¹ Now the Right Hon. James Bryce, M.P., Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

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Herbert Eustace Maxwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)A.D. 1879.] *THE NEW EDDYSTONE LIGHT.* 9

maintaining the efficiency of the Navy, but in the more difficult task of pleasing the naval world in general." As Smith passed to his seat among the Doctors, the undergraduates struck up the Admiral's song from Gilbert and Sullivan's opera "Pinafore." Among the others upon whom the degree was conferred on the same day were the Crown Prince of Sweden, Earl Dufferin,¹ the Bishop of Durham (Dr Lightfoot), the Right Hon. W. E. Forster, and Sir Frederick Leighton, President of the Royal Academy.

During the First Lord's usual annual tour of the dockyards, he gives, in a letter to his eldest daughter, a good description of a memorable ceremony—the laying of the foundation-stone of the new Eddystone Lighthouse:—

DEVONPORT, August 17, 1879.

Rain, rain, and more rain! True Devonshire weather, say some, and Lord Mount Edgeumbe, by way of parenthesis, observes, apologetically, "but we do have some really fine weather sometimes; only whenever there is a function it is wet." The night was calm and dark, and we slept quietly. 8 bells struck, and the watch was relieved. No trouble appeared to be impending. Gradually the ship seemed to be waking up. At 6 bells of the 2d watch we were roused from our uneasy slumbers, and at 8 the word was given to get ready, and

¹ Created Marquis of Dufferin and Ava in 1888.

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[More information](#)

at 1 bell of the 3d watch the ship began to move. B.¹ would say to walk through the water like a thing of life. I say nothing so absurd. It was mizzly and thick, and the tops of the hills were covered; but as we passed out of the harbour under the stern of a German man-of-war training-ship, the officers appeared on deck, and the band played "God save the Queen." They answered, and we did the same until the German band ended its labours, and we had then passed away.

Outside it was dark but not rough. We speedily lost sight of the land, and when we saw it again near the Start a long roll or swell had set in, which interfered with the dignity of your mother's walk, and which con-signed poor M. to a camp-stool just abaft the deck-house, where she remained absorbed in contemplation with her face covered with her hands. It rained, and then it lifted again, and then we arrived off the lighthouse, and saw a crowd of steamers, yachts, and small craft.

Presently the *Galatea* telegraphed first Lord and Sir C. Key to land and attend the laying of the stone. The first cutter was lowered, and in we jumped and pulled round to the rock on which the new lighthouse is being built. There were moments when the sea seemed to dispute our right to be there, and the water came right over and drenched the men standing on the wall or coffer-dam built round the foundations.

The two Princes landed and descended into the hole, and then the Duke of Edinburgh, as Master of the Trinity House, taking the trowel and mallet, went through the ceremony usual on such occasions. The Vicar of Plymouth read a short prayer, and at that moment the rain fell with peculiar violence, and washed all our heads. As soon as

¹ His youngest daughter, Beatrice, now the Hon. Mrs A. Acland.