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Sidney Lee, George Smith, Leslie Stephen  
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A MEMOIR  
OF  
GEORGE SMITH

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## *MEMOIR OF GEORGE SMITH*

### I

GEORGE SMITH (1824–1901), publisher, the founder and proprietor of the ‘Dictionary of National Biography,’ was of Scottish parentage. His paternal grandfather was a small landowner and farmer in Morayshire (or Elginshire), who died young and left his family ill provided for. His father, George Smith (1789–1846), began life as an apprentice to Isaac Forsyth, a bookseller and banker in the town of Elgin. At a youthful age he migrated to London with no resources at his command beyond his abilities and powers of work. By nature industrious, conscientious, and religious, he was soon making steady and satisfactory progress. At first he found employment in the publishing house of Rivington in St. Paul’s Churchyard. Subsequently he transferred his services to John Murray, the famous publisher of Albemarle Street, and while in Murray’s employ was sent on one occasion to deliver proof-sheets to Lord Byron. At length, in 1816, he and another Scottish immigrant to London, Alexander Elder, a native of Banff, who was Smith’s junior by a year, went into partnership, and set up in business for themselves on a modest scale. They opened premises at 158 Fenchurch Street as booksellers and stationers. The new firm was styled Smith & Elder. After three years the partners added publishing to the other branches of their business. On March 2, 1819, they

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were both admitted by redemption to the freedom of the Stationers' Company. Membership of the company was needful at the time for the pursuit in London of the publisher's calling. Some four months later, on July 19, 1819, Smith & Elder entered their earliest publication in the Stationers' Company's register. It was a well-printed collection of 'Sermons and Expositions of interesting Portions of Scripture,' by a popular congregational minister, Dr. John Morison of Trevor Chapel, Brompton. Thus unobtrusively did the publishing house set out on its road to fame and fortune, which it soon attained in moderate measure by dint of strenuous endeavour and skilful adaptation of means to ends.

On October 12, 1820—little more than a year after the elder Smith had become a London publisher—he married. His wife, Elizabeth Murray, then twenty-three years old, and thus her husband's junior by eight years, was daughter of Alexander Murray, a successful glass-ware manufacturer in London, who, like her husband, was of Elginshire origin. Mrs. Smith was a woman of much shrewdness, vivacity, and sanguine temper, in whose judgment and resourcefulness her husband, and afterwards her children, placed the utmost confidence. The young couple lived, on their marriage, over Smith & Elder's shop in Fenchurch Street, and there George Smith, the eldest son and second child (of six), was born on March 19, 1824.<sup>1</sup>

Very shortly after his birth the father removed his business and his family to 65 Cornhill—to that house which was fated to acquire wide repute, alike in literary and commercial circles. There, at the age of six, young George Smith suffered an attack of brain fever, and his mother, who showed him special indulgence, was warned

During the last twenty-eight years of his life Smith designated himself George M. Smith. He had bestowed his mother's name of Murray on all his children, and it was convenient to give a corresponding form to his own signature.

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against subjecting him to any severity of discipline. From infancy he was active and high-spirited, and domestic leniency encouraged in him an unruliness of temper which hampered the course of his education. But his parents desired him to enjoy every educational advantage that lay in their power. At first he was sent to Dr. Smith's boarding school at Rottingdean. Thence he passed at the age of ten to Merchant Taylors' School, but soon left it for a school at Blackheath, where the master, finding him intractable, advised his parents, greatly to their indignation, to send him to sea. Although he did well as far as the schoolwork was concerned, his propensity for mischievous frolic was irrepressible, and after he had spent a few terms at the City of London School his father deemed it wisest to take him into his office. He had shown an aptitude for mathematics, delighted in chemistry, and had not neglected Latin; but he was too young to have made great advance in the conventional subjects of study when in 1838, at the age of fourteen, he began a business career. Subsequently he received lessons at home in French, and showed a quick intuitive appreciation of good literature. But it was the stir of the mercantile world that first gave useful direction to his abundant mental energy.

During his boyhood his father's firm had made notable progress. On its removal to Cornhill, in 1824, Smith & Elder were joined by a third partner, and the firm assumed the permanent designation of Smith, Elder, & Co. The new partner was a man of brilliant and attractive gifts, if of weak and self-indulgent temperament. His entry into the concern greatly extended its sphere of action. His guardian, Æneas Macintosh, was chief partner in a great firm of Calcutta merchants, and this connection with India brought to the bookselling and publishing branches of Smith, Elder, & Co.'s business the new department of an Indian agency, which in course of time far outdistanced in commercial importance the rest of their work. At the

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outset the Indian operations were confined to the export of stationery and books to officers in the East India Company's service; but gradually all manner of commodities was dealt with, banking responsibilities were undertaken, and Smith, Elder, & Co. ultimately left most of the other Indian agencies in London far behind alike in the variety and extent of their transactions.

It was to the third partner, who had become a liveryman of the Clothworkers' Company on March 1, 1837, that Smith was apprenticed on beginning his business career. On May 2, 1838, the fact of his apprenticeship was duly entered in the Clothworkers' Company's records.

At the moment that Smith joined the firm it had entered into close relations with Lieutenant Waghorn, the originator of the overland route to India. While Waghorn was experimenting with his new means of communicating with the east, Smith, Elder, & Co. acted as his agents, and published from 1837 the many pamphlets in which he pressed his schemes and opinions on public notice. Some of Smith's earliest reminiscences related to Waghorn's strenuous efforts to perfect his system, with which the boy's native activity of mind enabled him to sympathise very thoroughly. All the letters that were sent to India under Waghorn's supervision across the Isthmus of Suez and through the Red Sea were despatched from Smith, Elder, & Co.'s office in Cornhill, and those reaching England from India by the same route were delivered there on arriving in London. Young Smith willingly helped his seniors to 'play at post office,' and found that part of his duties thoroughly congenial. But as a whole his labours in Cornhill were arduous. He was at work from half-past seven in the morning till eight o'clock in the evening, with very short intervals. His father wisely trained him in all the practical details of the stationery and bookselling business. He had to mend the office quills, and was taught how to bind books and

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even compose type. The dinner-hour in the middle of the day he often, however, contrived to spend at Dyer's riding school in Finsbury Square, where he became an expert horseman. Riding remained all his life his main recreation. In 1841, three years after his entry into the firm, his family removed to Denmark Hill.

The steady increase in the firm's general business was accompanied by marked activity in the publishing department, and early in the thirties that department won an assured reputation. For the first development of the publishing branch Mr. Elder was largely responsible, and though he applied himself to it somewhat spasmodically, and his ventures were by no means uniformly successful, some interesting results were quickly achieved. As early as 1826 Smith, Elder, & Co. issued, in partnership with Chalmers & Collins, a Glasgow firm, James Donnegan's 'New Greek and English Lexicon,' which was long a standard book. In 1827 they undertook single-handed the issue of Richard Thomson's 'Chronicles of London Bridge.' Of more popular literary work which the firm produced, the most attractive item was the fashionable annual called 'Friendship's Offering.' This elaborately illustrated gift-book was originally produced at the end of 1824, under the editorship of Thomas Kibble Hervey (subsequently editor of the 'Athenæum'), by a neighbouring publisher, Lupton Relfe of 13 Cornhill. The number for 1828 was the first published by Smith, Elder, & Co., and for fourteen consecutive years they continued to make annually an addition to the series. Hervey was succeeded in the editorship by the Scottish poet, Thomas Pringle, and ultimately by Leitch Ritchie, a well-known figure in journalism, who otherwise proved of service to the firm. The writers in 'Friendship's Offering' were the most distinguished of the day. They included not only veterans like Southey, Coleridge, and the Ettrick Shepherd, but also beginners like Tennyson and Ruskin.

The Hon. Mrs. Norton, Miss Mitford, Miss Strickland, were regular contributors. To the volume for 1833 Macaulay contributed his 'Ballad of the Armada.' The numerous plates in each issue were after pictures by the greatest artists of the time, and were engraved by the best available talent. When the series was at its zenith of popularity some eight to ten thousand copies of each volume were sold at Christmas.

Another of the literary connections of the firm was Miss Louisa Henrietta Sheridan, a daughter of Captain W. B. Sheridan, a very distant relative of the well-known family.<sup>1</sup> Of her personal attractions Smith cherished from boyhood admiring memories. Between 1831 and 1835 she edited for the firm five annual volumes entitled 'The Comic Offering, or Lady's M $\acute{e}$ lange of Literary Mirth,' which Robert Seymour, the practical originator of 'Pickwick,' helped to illustrate; and in 1838 Smith, Elder, & Co. produced for her 'The Diadem, a Book for the Boudoir,' with some valuable plates, and contributions by various well-known hands, including Thomas Campbell, James and Horace Smith, and Agnes Strickland.

In its attitude to fiction the young firm manifested, under Leitch Ritchie's influence, an exceptional spirit of enterprise. In 1833 Smith, Elder, & Co. started a 'Library of Romance,' a series of original novels and romances, English, American, or translated from foreign tongues, which they published at the prophetic price of six shillings. Fifteen volumes appeared under Ritchie's editorship before the series ended in 1835. The first was 'The Ghost Hunter and his Family,' by John and Michael Banim, the authors of 'The O'Hara Family;' the fourth was John Galt's 'Stolen Child' (1833); the sixth, 'The Slave-King,' a translation from Victor Hugo (1833); and the fifteenth and last was 'Ernesto,' a philosophical

<sup>1</sup> On Sept. 8, 1840, she married at Paris Lieut.-colonel Sir Henry Wyatt and died next year, Oct. 2, 1841.



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romance of interest by William [Henry] Smith (1808–1872), who afterwards won fame as author of ‘Thorndale.’

Among Smith, Elder, & Co.’s early works in general light literature which still retain their zest were James Grant’s ‘Random Recollections of the House of Commons’ and ‘Random Recollections of the House of Lords’ (1836). Nor was the firm disinclined to venture on art publications involving somewhat large risks. Clarkson Stanfield’s ‘Coast Scenery,’ a collection of forty views, issued (after publication in serial parts) at the price of 32s. 6d., appeared in 1836; and ‘The Byron Gallery,’ thirty-six engravings of subjects from Byron’s poems, followed soon afterwards at the price of 35s. These volumes met with a somewhat cool reception from the book-buying public, but an ambition to excel in the production of expensively illustrated volumes was well alive in the firm when, in 1838, Smith first enlisted in its service.<sup>1</sup> That year saw the issue of the first portion of the great collected edition of Sir Humphry Davy’s ‘Works,’ which was completed in nine volumes next year. In 1838, too, the firm inaugurated a series of elaborate reports of recent expeditions which the government had sent out for purposes of scientific exploration. The earliest of these great scientific publications was Sir Andrew Smith’s ‘Illustrations of the Zoology of South Africa,’ of which the first volume was issued in 1838, and four others followed between that date and 1847, all embellished with drawings of exceptional beauty by George Henry Ford. The government made a grant of 1,500*l.* in aid of the publication, and the five volumes were sold at the high price of 18*l.* Of like character were

<sup>1</sup> Besides the large ventures which they undertook on their own account, Smith, Elder, & Co. acted at this time as agents for many elaborate publications prepared by responsible publishers of Edinburgh and Glasgow; such were Thomas Brown’s *Fossil Conchology of Great Britain*, the first of the twenty-eight serial parts of which appeared in April 1837, and Kay’s *Edinburgh Portraits*, 2 vols. 4to. 1838.

the reports of the scientific results of Admiral Sir Edward Belcher's voyage to the Pacific in the *Sulphur*: a volume on the zoology, prepared by Richard Brinsley Hinds, came out under Smith, Elder, & Co.'s auspices in 1843, a second volume (on the botany) appeared in the next year, and a third volume (completing the zoology) in 1845. That was Smith, Elder, & Co.'s third endeavour in this special class of publication. To the second a more lasting interest attaches. It was 'The Zoological Report of the Expedition of H.M.S. *Beagle*,' in which Darwin sailed as naturalist. One thousand pounds was advanced by the government to the firm for the publication of this important work. The first volume appeared in large quarto in 1840. Four more volumes completed the undertaking by 1848, the price of the whole being 8*l.* 15*s.* Smith, Elder, & Co. were thus brought into personal relations with Darwin, the earliest of their authors who acquired worldwide fame. Independently of his official reports they published for him, in more popular form, extracts from them in volumes bearing the titles 'The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs' in 1842, 'Geological Observations on Volcanic Islands' in 1844, and 'Geological Observations on South America' in 1846.

The widening range of the firm's dealings with distant lands in its capacity of Indian agents rendered records of travel peculiarly appropriate to its publishing department, and Smith, Elder, & Co. boldly contemplated the equipment on their own account of explorers whose reports should serve them as literature. About 1840 Austen Henry Layard set out, at their suggestion, in the company of Edward Mitford, on an overland journey to Asia; but the two men quarrelled on the road, and the work that the firm contemplated was never written. Another project which was defeated by a like cause was an expedition to the south of France, on which Leitch Ritchie and James Augustus St. John started in behalf of Smith, Elder, & Co.'s publishing department. But the firm was