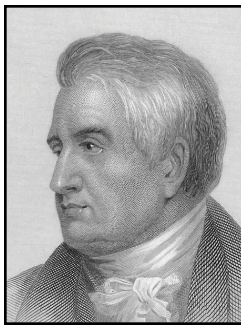


**HE LOVES LIBERTY—BUT NOT TOO
MUCH OF IT**
SYDNEY SMITH (1771-1845)



While strong emotions flood many of Robert Burns's letters, a cool wit gives life and charm to most of Sydney Smith's. Their attractiveness increases as he advances from obscurity as a young curate and tutor to fame as a polemicist and a renowned wit. His collected correspondence has the structure of a funnel. Beginning with his reports on the two sons of the parliamentarian Michael Hicks Beach, whom he successively lives with and instructs in Edinburgh, it expands to cover, first, his

engagement with figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, and then his close involvement with the English Whig aristocracy and the causes they promote, and his public foray into the politics of the Anglican Church.

During his residence in Edinburgh from 1798 to 1803, Smith forms friendships with Francis Jeffrey and other intellectuals: together they found the *Edinburgh Review*, which becomes the leading liberal journal in Britain, a kingdom that still suffers from a paranoid fear that even mild reforms can lead in time to atrocities akin to those of the French Revolution. In 1803, as a recently married man and a new father, he reluctantly leaves the Scottish capital in search of support for his growing family, and moves to London. Here he preaches, gives highly popular lectures on moral philosophy, and is soon in demand as a captivating guest at dinner parties. Before long, he is intimate at Holland House, the social centre of the Whigs, whose reformist zeal he shares. Late in the decade, Lord Grey, the future Whig Prime Minister, and his wife come to be among his closest friends. Soon after Smith publishes anonymously in 1807 and 1808 his *Peter Plimley Letters*, in which he marshals reason and ridicule to oppose the civil disabilities imposed on Roman Catholics, his authorship is an open secret. He continues to contribute unsigned articles to the *Edinburgh Review*.

Besides the satisfaction of his work and social life, Smith is blessed with happiness in his family: he seems, indeed, to have found his niche. Then something very like tragedy strikes. Having been endowed with the living of Foston in Yorkshire in 1806, he employs a curate to serve that northern parish. In 1808, however, a new Archbishop of York insists he must make his home there. For the rest of his life, his letters are dotted with complaints about the monotony of rural existence and his lack of companions who can converse on his own level. Yet he is resilient enough to develop an interest in agriculture, to continue writing on behalf of liberal causes, and to make the most of his annual three months' leave of absence to visit friends and relatives in London and elsewhere as far as his income allows.

Although Smith likes to complain that he is a poor man—"I thank God," he writes, "who has made me poor, that he has made me merry"—when his pleas for a more congenial clerical post have proved fruitless for about three years, he has a house built under his personal supervision, and he feels he has succeeded in "making a snug parsonage." This dwelling, he reassures Lord and Lady Grey, who are about to visit, has already accommodated the four Leycesters, with their five servants and five horses. While liking the house itself, he complains to Francis Jeffrey in December 1814, "the expense of it will keep me a very poor man, a close prisoner here for my life." But in January 1828, just after Emily, his younger daughter, marries the promising lawyer George Hibbert, he is given a prebend at Bristol. As a member of the chapter responsible for the Cathedral, he now enjoys the benefit of "an extremely comfortable" house, where he can rejoice in the "masts of West-Indiamen seen from the windows." He plans to spend every winter in the city.

In April 1829, the fragile health of his greatly cherished elder son, Douglas, whose acquisition of a love of books has delighted him, finally gives way. "It is the first real misfortune," he declares to his friend Mrs. Meynell, "which ever befell me." He writes this from Combe Florey in Somersetshire, having been able to exchange Foston for this southern parish.

After Catholic Emancipation is achieved in 1829, Smith turns his attention to his friend Lord Grey's campaign to extend and rationalize Parliamentary representation. Before the Reform Bill is passed in 1832, Smith is advanced to a much richer and more prestigious prebend at St. Paul's Cathedral. His happiness increases in 1834 when Saba, his elder daughter, marries a widower with three children, the much esteemed physician and travel writer Henry Holland. The new prebend allows Smith to spend much more time in his beloved London, where he is able to buy a house in 1835 and a superior one—"the essence of all that is comfortable" he calls it—four years after. The later causes he takes up are the claim of the Roman Catholic priests of Ireland to public funding, the defence of the

lower clergy of his own Church against the bullying of bishops, opposition to voting by secret ballot, and the denunciation of several American states that are defaulting on their debts. In 1839, he publishes his *Works*, including many fine articles from the *Edinburgh Review*, in three volumes. "The Liberal journals praise me to the skies," he tells one correspondent; "the Tories are silent, grateful for my attack upon the Ballot." (He argues that there is far less intimidation of voters than is supposed, and he is writing before a method is devised to combine a ballot with an opportunity for a recount.) Two years before his own decease in February 1845, his estranged younger brother Courtenay dies and leaves a large fortune, of which he rejoices to inherit a third.

The playful strand in Smith's letters reflects the element in his personality that makes his presence in company so valued. His famous wit erupts in wordplay. In his early days at Combe Florey, he writes to a Yorkshire friend, "The only acquaintance I have made here is the clerk of the parish, a very sensible man, with great *amenity of disposition*"; and when Emily, now Mrs. Holland, visits with her family, he informs Mrs. Grote, "My house is, as I tell my daughter, as full of Hollands as a gin-shop." Less innocently, he points out to Lord Holland that if Samuel Rogers's given name is considered as a noun and its surname as a verb, it takes on a bawdy meaning. That he could suggest Lady Holland pass on to her husband his observation that despite her commendable personality Lady Louis Petty lacks the fine legs of Lady Elizabeth Fielding suggests that prudery was not allowed to cramp the friends' humour.

Humour, indeed, is everywhere in Smith's letters. Readers meet it in his turns of phrase, his observations, and the incidents he narrates. From London he will send his book of sermons to Lady Grey in Northumberland "conceiving that in so remote a part of England, theology is not to be had so pure as here." A London rout (a large evening party) is a "scene of simplicity, truth, and nature." When Mrs. Grote decides to attend one of his services in St. Paul's, he warns her, "Do not flatter yourself with the delusive hope of a slumber; I preach violently, and there is a strong smell of sulphur in my sermons." In this and other instances, he delights to tease his correspondents. Notified that his son-in-law Dr. Holland is about to visit, he assures him there is plenty of illness in the neighbourhood, so he has bought a new doorknocker, and just before his daughter Saba's wedding, he announces to Lady Grey, "We are all well, and mean to be in town by the 19th of next month. There is a report that we are going to be married, but I know nothing about it." On the death of the Vicar of Edmonton in 1843, Smith, by virtue of his office in St. Paul's, has the right to take or give away the living. The late Vicar's family is extremely needy and in terror of being ejected from the Vicarage. Smith describes to his wife how he has vis-

ited them, told them he has disposed of the living, and only very gradually revealed that the person he has bestowed it on is the deceased Vicar's son.

Alongside his humour, Smith exercises in his letters the capacity for lucid reasoning and clear argument that distinguishes his polemics. When the former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Denman, introduces a Bill to allow an affirmation to be accepted in the law courts as an alternative to an oath, Smith writes to him:

All that the Legislature ought to inquire is whether this scruple is now become so common as to cause the frequent interruption of justice. This admitted, the remedy ought to follow as a matter of course. We are to get the best evidence for establishing truth, — not the best evidence *we can imagine*, but the best evidence *we can procure*; and if you cannot get oath, you must put up with affirmation, as far better than no evidence at all.

One of Smith's favourite words in his letters is "agreeable": books, meals, events, and above all people can be "agreeable." An easy-going "agreeable" life would certainly have appealed to the Rev. Sydney Smith. "Nobody, I assure you," he writes to Lord Holland, "is more desirous of living at ease than I am," and he holds that Seneca's preaching on the contempt of wealth is "intolerable nonsense." However, his compassion and sense of justice, as well as a reasonableness more characteristic of the eighteenth than the nineteenth century, make him consciously sacrifice his hopes of preferment by championing liberal causes in a reactionary period.

As a conscientious young clergyman, Smith is struck on his arrival in Edinburgh by the seriousness of its religious life. He informs his student's mother:

In Scotland the clergy are extremely active in the discharge of their functions, and are, from the hold they have on the minds of the people, a very important body of men. The common people are extremely conversant with the Scriptures; are really not so much pupils as formidable critics to their preachers: many of them are well read in controversial divinity.

He notes a contrasting situation in the country he has come from: "In England I maintain (except amongst ladies in the middle class of life) there is no religion at all."

In spite of these remarks, Smith throughout his life has no use for "controversial divinity." One of his complaints against bishops is that they are addicted to "useless Theology." In 1837, he protests that there is not an unorthodox passage in all his writings: "I have always avoided specula-

tive, and preached practical, religion." He shuns both irrational intrusions into the faith and the notion that God is cruel or bullying. Those clergy who discover in the Prophets forecasts of events in the French Revolution he denounces for driving reasonable men away from religion, and he chides some acquaintances who are becoming "a little more Methodistical":

I endeavour in vain to give them more cheerful ideas of religion; to teach them that God is not a jealous, childish, merciless tyrant; that he is best served by a regular tenour of good actions, — not by bad singing, ill-composed prayers, and eternal apprehensions. But the luxury of false religion is, to be unhappy.

Abstract theology seems to Smith a net in which he prefers not to be caught. Similarly, an element of northern life that disturbs him is the addiction to theoretical speculation. To Francis Jeffrey, he objects that Scottish philosophers

pursue truth, without caring if it be *useful* truth. They are more fond of disputing on mind and matter than on anything which can have a reference to the real world, inhabited by real men, women, and children; a philosopher that descends to the present state of things is debased in their estimation.

His aversion to abstraction does not prevent Smith in his later years from taking pleasure in inviting men and women to what he calls "a philosophical breakfast": "Nothing taken for granted! Everything (except the Thirty-nine Articles) called in question — real philosophers!"

When his concentration on "practical religion" leads to the accusation that he is a Socinian, his distaste for its Unitarianism oozes out onto the page as he owns to Lady Grey that he has an instinctive attachment to the Trinity. If he adheres to religious tradition, however, it is largely to the heavily rational eighteenth century tradition exemplified by Swift and Montagu. Accordingly, in his last years, he is a zealous opponent of the Puseyite movement to promote more ceremonial forms of worship and bring the Church of England closer to the highly authoritarian Church of Rome. Fearing that her prolonged residence at Rome may lead his friend Lady Davy to succumb to Catholic proselytizers, he adjures her, "Only promise me that you will not give up, till you have subjected their arguments to my examination, and given me a chance of reply." To the author Harriet Martineau, he writes in 1842:

I am just now come from London, where I have been doing duty at St. Paul's, and preaching against the Puseyites — I. Because

they lessen the aversion to the Catholic faith, and the admiration of Protestantism, which I think one of the greatest improvements the world ever made. II. They inculcate the preposterous surrender of the understanding to bishops. III. They make religion an affair of trifles, of postures, and of garments.

Hostile as he is to the doctrines and practices of Dissenters and Catholics, he is also a fierce enemy of the dark cloud which the law spreads over their lives, and he strives for its dispersion. He protests that Dissenters are prevented from being married except by Anglican clergymen in a ceremony in which they are compelled to repeat and appear to accept doctrines they believe to be unbiblical. Although he classifies Methodists among “fanatics and bigots,” he promises his editor, Francis Jeffrey, an article in which he will attack the legal cruelty imposed on them. He is horrified that the number of offices from which Catholics are excluded amounts to “thirty-five or forty thousand.”

Some of the most stubborn opposition to Catholic emancipation comes from the Anglican Church. Smith finds many of his fellow clerics viciously illiberal. “We have had meetings of the clergy here,” he informs Lady Holland in 1813, “upon the subject of the Catholic question, but none in my district; if there be, I shall certainly give my solitary voice in favour of religious liberty, and shall probably be tossed in a blanket for my pains.” He observes how uncommon in the Church is the sacrifice he has reluctantly made, namely relinquishing the prospect of advancement in order to be faithful to a principle. To Lord Holland, he remarks how hard it is for a priest to remain true to his conscience – as few do – and still support his children. Perhaps most damning is his confession to his friend Lady Mary Bennet concerning the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry: “She is very unpopular with the clergy: examples of living, active virtue disturb our repose, and give birth to distressing comparisons: we long to burn her alive.”

Such an opinion of the lower clergy pales before the majestic scorn that Smith bestows on the majority of bishops. In 1820, when most of them oppose George IV’s attempt to divorce his Queen, he writes to Francis Jeffrey of the strange appearance of honesty and principle among them, and in 1837 he declares, “Pretended heterodoxy is the plea with which Bishops endeavoured to keep off the bench every man of spirit and independence.” On the death of William Otter, Bishop of Chichester, he commends the deceased for being “as liberal as a bishop is permitted to be.” Waging ecclesiastical class warfare, he defends the lower clergy against the oppression of the Bench in his *Letter to Archdeacon Singleton*, and in an open letter to *The Times*, a masterpiece of bitter argument, he assails Charles Blomfield, Bishop of London. When Blomfield is impudent enough

to contrast the comparative poverty of the lower clergy with the far worse poverty that surrounds them, Smith is able to point to the lavish fortunes and residences enjoyed by bishops. Afterwards he admits to Mary Berry, "I was sorry to be forced to give [Blomfield] such a beating, but he was very saucy and deserved it."

Politically, from first to last, Sydney Smith is firmly in the liberal tradition followed by Horace Walpole. Moreover, his pessimism during the conflict with Napoleon mirrors Walpole's pessimism during the Seven Years War and the American War of Independence. Even when Wellington is winning battles in Spain, Smith feels sure his successes are bringing only a temporary respite. In 1809, he prophesies to Francis Jeffrey, "though the struggle will be long, the greater chance surely is that this country will at length be involved in the general ruin." Two years further on, he laments to the same friend, "Can any sensible man, — any human being but a little trumpery parson, — believe that we shall not be swallowed up? It is folly not to gather up a little, while it is yet possible, and to go to America."

Like Walpole and so many other Britons, Smith prizes his country as the home of liberty. At the beginning of 1813, he confides to the Scottish physician John Allen his fear that "everything is fast setting in for arbitrary power. The Court will grow bolder and bolder." Later, while admitting to the prominent Whig John Wisham that "Church and King in moderation are very good things," he adds, "but we have too much of both." In 1817, when the prosecution of a group of radicals for High Treason fails, he informs Lord Grey that he is pleased, though his Yorkshire neighbours are not, and in the same year he firmly agrees with Lord Holland's opposition to the suspension of Habeas Corpus. Not surprisingly, he is indignant at "the enormity of the outrage" on learning of the deaths of eleven people in the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 when the Manchester magistrates provoke resistance from a mass meeting at St. Peter's Fields by having the radical speaker Henry Hunt arrested. Smith is a vocal opponent of the Game Laws, by which "men of large fortune put men of no fortune in prison on account of partridges."

Part of the unrest in the new industrial cities like Manchester and Birmingham arises from the outdated electoral pattern, which leaves them unrepresented. There are fifty-seven "rotten boroughs" — constituencies with few voters, who are often easily influenced or intimidated — but so angry is much of the population and so resistant is the House of Lords to Lord Grey's attempt at reform, that there is much fear of rebellion. Early in 1831, Smith writes to Lord Holland's son, "I see nobody between Lord Grey and revolution," and he tells another correspondent that some peers, fearful of the mob, are boarding up their windows. Lord Holland learns how an audience in Somerset was delighted by his "glowing harangue"

in March in support of Lord Grey's Reform Bill; in October he delivers another on the same subject in the same place and is astonished at the result: "I had no idea Mrs. Partington [nickname of the harangue in question] would make such a fortune; I sent my speech to nobody, but it was copied into the 'Times.'" He believes that Britain should restrict her efforts to her own reform, and in 1823 disagrees with those who want to give military aid to Spaniards rising against an oppressive government: "Why are the English," he asks, "to be the sole vindicators of the human race?"

Staunch Whig as he is, Smith is ready to mix with supporters of other parties. After staying with Lord Ashburton, he writes, "To be in a Tory house is like being in another planet," and he observes of his very left wing friends the Grotes, "She is very clever and very odd. Grote is a reasonable and reasoning Radical, with manners a little formal but very polished." Yet Smith, driven partly by his compassion for the poor and his sense of justice, partly by fear of revolution and mob violence, detests the Radical programme as heartily as he deplores Tory resistance to change. To him, William Cobbett (who has, indeed, many reprehensible prejudices) is "that consummate villain" and Daniel O'Connell, who seeks the repeal of the Act of Union of 1800 that deprived Ireland of its own Parliament, is "that Scoundrel." The doctrine that all men are equal he denounces as "pernicious cant." In 1842, encountering the Chartists' campaign for something like twentieth century democracy, he almost splutters on paper as he writes to Lady Grey, "the mob have got hold, under the name of Chartism, of some plan for political innovation; but that plan is so foolish, that I do not think it will be long-lived." He cannot help, however, admitting "that a considerable portion of what these rascals say, is so very true." In keeping with his distinction between Catholicism and Catholics and between Dissent and Dissenters, he commends his friend Sir George Philips, a Manchester cotton magnate, for behaviour "very manly and respectable, in advocating the cause of the poor democrats, who by their knavery and folly are very contemptible, but are not therefore to be abandoned to their oppressors." As a distant observer, he is fascinated by the United States of America's experiment of living without an established church, a monarchy, or an aristocracy. "I doubt," he states to Francis Jeffrey in 1818, "if there ever was an instance of a new people conducting their affairs with so much wisdom, or if there ever was such an extensive scene of human happiness and prosperity."

That Smith instinctively recoils from the thought of the gallows is evident from his report to Lady Holland: "Conceive the horror of fourteen men hung yesterday! And yet it is difficult to blame the Judges for it, though it would be some relief to be able to blame them." The sentence is for a murder that arose from Luddite attacks on machinery that put men

out of work. But faced with mob violence, Smith can be severe. When there is rioting in Bristol during the struggle to pass the Reform Bill, he counsels Lady Grey:

Pray do not be good-natured about Bristol. I must have ten people hanged, and twenty transported, and thirty imprisoned; it is absolutely necessary to give the multitude a severe blow, for their conduct at Bristol has been most atrocious. You will save lives by it in the end. There is no plea of want, as there was in the agricultural riots.

Smith seems to have no more sympathy with Luddites than with Chartists. Surprisingly, he takes an illiberal stand when a Factory Act to limit working hours is proposed. He admits that there may be a case for regulating the conditions under which children are employed, but protests to Lady Grey: "it does seem to be absurd to hinder a woman of thirty from working as long as she pleases; but mankind are getting mad with humanity and Samaritanism." The provision for a ten-hour day draws from him the response, "I am a decided duodecimalist." How well informed is he about working conditions in the factories?

Though he is an ardent advocate of the 1832 Reform Bill, which greatly extends the franchise, Smith admits to a little nervousness at the prospect of "such extensive changes," and after the Act is passed, he declares, "I am for no more movements." While he rejoices at Lord Grey's success, he points out, "the consequences of giving so much power to the people have not yet been tried at a period of bad harvest and checked manufactures." "I love liberty," he admits to the Scottish judge J. A. Murray, "but hope it can be so managed that I shall have soft beds, good dinners, fine linen, etc. for the rest of my life."

The Factory Act of 1847 is carried under the Prime Ministership of the Tory Sir Robert Peel. In 1844, Smith has announced, "Sir Robert Peel and I have made friends." This is not very surprising since less than two years before he has declared, "I believe Peel to be a philosopher disguised in a Tory fool's-cap, who will do everything by slow degrees which the Whigs proposed to do at once." Moreover, Smith is a convivial man who makes many friends and whose company is much prized. His conversation is evidently as memorable as his letters, but there is one kind of person he is loath to meet. Declining an invitation, he objects to the presence of a killjoy:

At the sight of —, away fly gaiety, ease, carelessness, happiness. Effusions are checked, faces are puckered up; coldness, formality, and reserve are diffused over the room, and the social temperature falls down to zero.

Smith discloses more than once that he is liable to depression and that loneliness is to him a poison. When he is with others, however, he spreads good cheer. His small daughter Saba tells her mother (as the lady records in a letter to Francis Jeffrey), "you are so melancholy and so dull because papa is away; he is so merry, that he makes us all gay." There is every indication in his letters that his marriage is happy, and his many female friendships and observations on good-looking women appear to be innocent. On one occasion, he writes to Lady Morley, "Mrs. Sydney allows me to accept the present you sent me." He depends much on company both within and outside his family. After his daughter Emily marries, he laments to Lady Grey, "I feel as if I had lost a Limb and was walking about with one Leg," and when her sister follows suit six years later he teases the same correspondent, "I shall advertise for a daughter; I cannot possibly get on without a daughter." But his sons-in-law become his good friends, and their visits, along with their wives and children, alleviate the privations of his life in the country.

After he is banished from London to Yorkshire, Smith writes to his correspondents about his struggle to reconcile himself to rural life. He tells how he begins to include agricultural books in his reading and to take an interest in gardening. He is appointed a Justice of the Peace, and in 1820 he details his many activities to Lord Holland: "I have also played my part in the usual manner, as doctor, justice, pacifier, preacher, farmer, neighbour, and diner-out." Yet he cannot help pining for the clash of minds, play of wit, and good dinners to be enjoyed among the Whig luminaries and city intelligentsia. He remembers "that there was a Metropolis; that there were wits, chemists, poets, splendid feasts, and captivating women." Although for the rest of his life his letters from the country mention with some concern the state of the harvest along with droughts, downpours and heat-waves, his complaint "I am losing my life and time in thinking and talking of bulls, cows, horses, and sheep" is characteristic.

With his move to Combe Florey, Smith does find some improvement. Here, he is forced to admit, the country has an amazing beauty – so much so that he can refer to the "little paradise" he and his wife are blessed with. Even so, it is a grievance that "there is no man within twenty miles who knows anything of history, of angles, or of the mind." When his son-in-law Hibbert ends a visit, he has "no one to argue with." After three months' residence, even the natural splendours of Combe Florey fade, and eventually he feels he is condemned to survive on "commonplaces and truisms" until he can escape back to London. His efforts to transform his taste are in vain. "I do all I can," he confides to Lady Holland, "to love the country, and endeavour to believe those poetical lies which I read in [Samuel] Rogers and

others, on the subject; which said deviations from truth were, by Rogers, all written in St. James's-place."

Although he reads extensively, Smith devotes little time to poetry and is completely oblivious to the greatness of the Romantic movement which buds and blossoms in his lifetime. He endorses Francis Jeffrey's critical demolition of Wordsworth and Coleridge, but feels that once the job has been done the victims should be spared further assaults. "I have not read the review of Wordsworth," he informs Jeffrey in 1814, "because the subject is to me so very uninteresting; but, may I ask, was it worth while to take any more notice of a man respecting whom the public opinion is completely made up? do not such repeated attacks upon a man wear in some little degree the shape of persecution?" Similarly, he observes to Murray, "Jeffrey has thrashed [Coleridge] happily and deservedly;—but is it not time now to lay up his cudgel?"

Smith, who loves to recommend books to his friends, is readily drawn to history, biography, and accounts of travel. He reads a little fiction, principally the novels of Scott, which he seems to arrange on a scale according to merit. "When I get hold of one of these novels," he confesses, "turnips, sermons, and justice-business are all forgotten." His view of fiction is seen in his comment that *The Bride of Lammermoor* is superior to the work of other novelists though not up to Scott's usual standard. Dickens he takes to with the appearance of that author's third novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, admitting to Sir George Philips, "I stood out against Mr. Dickens as long as I could, but he has conquered me." He makes the acquaintance of this new luminary and enjoys accepting an invitation from him, unless "I am invited by any man of greater genius than yourself."

Late in life, Smith states, "I have no imagination myself, but am deeply in admiration of those who have." Perhaps he is thinking of Scott and Dickens. Notable correspondent as he is, he has little power of evoking scenes in his reader's mind. However, when in 1826 he can at last afford to fulfil his long thwarted ambition to visit Paris, the letters that he writes daily to his wife convey an idea of the spaciousness of the streets and the splendour of the buildings. After beholding the Duke of Orleans's palace, he decides that "*magnificence* must be scratched out of our dictionary." What seems to impress him equally is the superior manners of the French. "I have not seen a cobbler," he asserts, echoing Lord Chesterfield, "who is not better bred than an English gentleman." He has criticisms as well as praise—the street lighting is poor at night, there are sharp stones in the pavements, and the carrying of supposed holy relics in procession is "absurd, disgraceful, and ridiculous." He longs to show the city to his wife and in 1835 does so.

While Smith's descriptive skill is limited, his thumbnail sketches of characters can be trenchant. He depicts the Bishop of Exeter as "hiding shyness, awkwardness and barrenness, by an appearance of bustle, but very good-natured and civil." The American statesman Daniel Webster impresses him as "grand, simple, cold, slow, wise, and good." A lady's eyes "express every soft and amiable virtue, with just as much of wickedness as is necessary to prevent insipidity."

There are numerous characters of whom we are afforded many, if sometimes less revealing, glimpses. The early letters paint comprehensive portraits of Smith's pupils, the brothers Michael and William Beach. Michael is somewhat vain and moody, insubordinate on occasion but well meaning and soon repentant. He has some interest in science but none in literature, and, being free of vices, will, Smith tells his parents, make "a very respectable country gentleman." His younger brother, on the contrary, appears to be an exemplary young man—good humoured, an excellent student, and universally liked. His only fault is a vein of shyness, and Smith assures his mother that her fears of his being led astray when he goes to a university are without foundation.

Of Sydney Smith's own relatives, we hear most of his father and his elder brother Robert, known as Bobus. The former appears to be a difficult man with whom Sydney is in time happily reconciled. Eventually he is able to write to Francis Jeffrey, "My father is one of the very few people I have ever seen improved by age. He is become careless, indulgent, and anacreontic." (The allusion is to Anacreon, an ancient Greek poet who celebrated the pleasures life offers.) To Robert, for whom Sydney has great affection, there are many references, but no clear portrait of him emerges.

Among Smith's friends, it is interesting to find Mary and Agnes Berry, formerly the young friends of the old Horace Walpole, now in their maturity. They are among the bluestockings, a class of women that appeals to Smith, and at their request he arranges for them to meet Dickens. He commends their intelligence and sense, which are apt to be hidden by their restless demeanour, which reminds him of seabirds when a storm is imminent.

In two cases, Smith changes his view of a person prominent in his correspondence. The abilities of Henry Brougham, a young lawyer, a Whig, and a writer who is to contribute to the *Edinburgh Review*, impress him as early as 1803. An ardent opponent of slavery and advocate of widespread education, Brougham goes on to have a notable career in Parliament and serves as Lord Chancellor in Whig governments, but he eventually becomes so unpredictable and unreliable that he antagonizes his colleagues and after 1835 is left out of office. Smith notes in 1818 his capacity for lasting hatreds. In 1825, he is still on good enough terms with Brougham to enjoy staying with him, but a decade later, he terms his conduct insane as he

describes how the ex-Lord Chancellor blabbed inside stories of European politics in a Marseilles restaurant to the astonishment of diners and waiters. He becomes also too radical for Smith, who, while sharing his abhorrence of slavery, accuses him of publishing “democratical” writings and suggests to Lady Grey that if the Devil wanted a vacation he could safely allow Brougham to stand in for him.

The young Smith and the young Brougham are both habitués of Holland House, where Smith develops a strong affection for Lady Holland as well as her husband. He finds her both handsome and clever. In 1810 he declares that he has spent some of his happiest times in her house, and five years later, when she has been long abroad, he pleads with her to return:

Now pray do settle in England, and remain quiet; depend upon it, it is the most agreeable place. I have heard five hundred travelled people assent that there is no such agreeable house in Europe as Holland House: why should you be the last person to be convinced of this, and the first to make it true?

But it gradually becomes apparent that the lady has some defects. She has a distaste for serious articles such as Smith contributes to the *Edinburgh Review*, and she dislikes his much loved brother Bobus and does not hide the fact. In the 1830s, she becomes irrationally terrified of death from heart failure, and after the eminent doctor Sir Benjamin Brodie, following a careful examination, assures her that her circulation is flawless, Smith reports to Lady Grey that he finds the disappointed patient in despair; she begs him to guide her towards the discovery of some alternative ailment, but he steadfastly refuses.

Although Smith retains much affection for Lady Holland, Lady Grey becomes the confidante to whom he discloses her shortcomings. The worst emerges after she becomes a widow in 1840. On one occasion, she insists that Smith give her a dinner when he is alone in London without even a cook, and next month he writes of leaving her complaining to seventeen dinner guests that all her friends have abandoned her. Three months before he dies, while he is receiving medical treatment in London, he regales Lady Grey with a description of how he amuses himself by replying to Lady Holland’s endless questions with ridiculous accounts of his symptoms leading her to pride herself on foreseeing his imminent demise.

The most obvious attraction of Sydney Smith’s letters is the wit and humour he can infuse even into a reply to a dinner invitation or a reference to the upcoming marriage of a daughter. But this sparkling surface that reflects the personality which makes him so prized as a friend and a guest coexists with the earnestness of a clear thinker and liberal crusader ever

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ready to combat the abuses of his age. In his correspondence, as in his daily life, the laughter-loving merrymaker shows himself to be also a loyal clergyman, a dedicated reformer, and a loving husband and father.