

Smith, George Gregory (1865-1932), literary scholar. Born at Grove Street Edinburgh on 20 June 1865, the son of Camilla Smith (nee Baxter) and Henry G. C. Smith, a mathematics master at George Heriot's School and author of mathematics textbooks. Elder brother of David Nichol Smith (1875-1962). Married, 1896 in Edinburgh, to Mary Cadell (1866-1909).

Smith graduated with an MA from Edinburgh University in 1884, where he was the Vans Dunlop scholar in English. He matriculated at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1885 and graduated with a second class BA in Modern History in 1888. He returned to Edinburgh and became Lecturer in English language and literature at the university in 1892, working for three years under the Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature David Masson (1822-1907), and then for ten years under Masson's successor, George Saintsbury (1845-1933). At Edinburgh, Smith took on a large burden of teaching in the new Honours school in English and played a significant part in its development - the department at the time consisting only of the professor and himself.

Smith had begun academic publication in 1890 with an edited collection of Scottish historical documents, *The Days of James IV, 1488-1513*, which he followed with a further historical anthology, *The Book of Islay* (1895), and an eight-volume edition of *The Spectator* (1897-8) for J. M. Dent, which would remain in print as an Everyman edition into the 1950s. His first substantial authored work, *The Transition Period* (1900), was a survey of fifteenth-century European writing for Saintsbury's 'Periods of European Literature' series, which he followed with two more edited collections, *Specimens of Middle Scots* (1902) and the two-volume *Elizabethan Critical Essays* (1904), before editing the Globe edition of *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (1905) for Macmillan.

Smith was appointed to the post of Professor of English Literature and Librarian at Queen's College, Belfast, in 1905 continuing in both roles when the college gained its university charter in 1908. At Queen's he wrote on Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe for the *Cambridge History of English Literature* Vol. 5 (1907) and contributed *Ben Jonson* (1919) to Macmillan's English Men of Letters series. He would also publish there the two contrasting works in Scottish literature that would cement his academic reputation: one which was considered in his lifetime to be his greatest achievement, the other by which he would be widely remembered posthumously in the field of Scottish literary studies.

The first was his three-volume edition of *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (1906-1914) for the Scottish Text Society. This edition, and his diligent chairmanship of the Society for seven years, placed him at the heart, and for a time at the head, of a movement that had, from the Society's beginning in 1882, been doing vital work in recovering Scotland's literary history and laying the academic foundation for the Scottish Literary Renaissance that would emerge in the 1920s. The second was his book of ten interlinked essays on Scottish historical literature, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919). Not widely noticed at the time, the book came to the attention of the still largely unknown T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), who reviewed it in August 1919 for the *Athenaeum*. Eliot's review,

'Was there a Scottish Literature?', would become notorious in Scottish literary studies for its seemingly impudent use of the past tense and its insistence that Scottish literature ought best to consider itself as a complement to English literature rather than as an independent practice with its own distinct traditions. Eliot's use of the past tense in talking of Scottish literature was, in fact, true to Smith's thesis, which had argued that the defining characteristics of Scottish literature had gone into terminal decline after Sir Walter Scott. But in arguing for Scottish literature's dependence on the literature of England, Eliot minimised the work's attempts to carve out a distinctive sets of traits commonly found in historical Scottish literature.

The term that Smith coined for these traits and their distinctive character was the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy', which he defined in general terms as a willingness in Scots to embrace self-contradiction, and in more particularly literary-historical terms as a tendency of Scottish writers to switch between modes of carefully-detailed realism and outrageous flights of speculative fancy: the earnest accumulation of fact and application of reason on the one hand, and on the other 'the airier pleasure to be found in the confusion of the senses, in the fun of things thrown topsy-turvy'. Smith's definition proved helpful to other critics as a means of rationalising the dualisms that many had noted in work by the likes of Walter Scott, James Hogg, and Robert Louis Stevenson, but it had a more direct and controversial influence on Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978), the animateur of the Scottish Renaissance. MacDiarmid found in Smith's Antisyzygy a licence for for his own strongly antithetical spirit and a timely encouragement for a newly-revived Scottish literature in the process of defining itself in distinction to the English tradition. MacDiarmid's essay 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea' and his poem 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy' were controversial and contested, but they injected Smith's idea of antisyzygy and its notions of an independent, characteristically Scottish dualism into the mainstream of critical discussion. For much of the twentieth century, even those Scottish writers and critics who rejected Smith's analysis and MacDiarmid's interpretation of it would find themselves having to address the idea of a Caledonian Antisyzygy and engage with it in their discussions of Scottish culture and the literary tradition.

For the majority of his academic career Smith was known as a methodical historical and linguistic scholar and diligent textual editor rather than a critic with a particularly strongly-developed literary or aesthetic sense. He was, according to his *Times* obituary 'a cautious, sober, and distrustful critic' whose work could at times be 'dry and flat, if not drab'. A former student at Edinburgh recalled him as a clear-headed, rational, and at times stimulating teacher, though noted that some found his lecturing uninspired and that there was a common view that his written work 'lacked warmth'. At Queen's he had often seemed distant and Augustan, a somewhat isolated man in the Ulster context who showed kindness to interested students but who didn't suffer fools gladly. It is perhaps ironic, then, that he became widely celebrated after his death for coining an obscure and rather dry academic phrase that would go on to become a token of all that was radical, dangerous, and oppositional in Scottish literature.

Smith retired from Queen's in 1930, taking up an Emeritus Professorship and moving to his London residence in Ashley Gardens. He died there on 3 March 1932 and was buried beside his wife in the Dean cemetery in Edinburgh.

David Goldie

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