

MR. SMITH

MR. SMITH is not a very distinguished name to possess. And even when, as in this case, Mr. Smith becomes the Rev. Mr. Smith, he still remains obscure. So obscure was Smith, indeed, that probably not one in twenty of our modern historians could place him. He is, it is true, in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, but under a wrong name.

James Elishama (not "Elimalet") Smith was born in 1801, the son of a hard and narrow Glasgow manufacturer. His father was intensely religious and Puritanical. From him Smith inherited that peculiar semi-metaphysical, semi-mystic cast of mind which is so difficult for a south-country Englishman to understand. The house in which he was brought up (his father was an Irvingite) was full not merely of disputations on doctrine and study of the text of the Bible, but also of argument on the new prophets—the successors of Joanna Southcote, who were claiming the same authority as Amos and Isaiah, and whom James' father, the adherent of Edward Irving, was half inclined to follow.

Though a manufacturer, Mr. Smith, senior, was by no means well off, and it was only his determination to send all his numerous sons into the ministry that gave to James the fair education he received at Glasgow University. In 1818 James left Glasgow and earned his living as a tutor and church probationer. This mode of life he carried on until 1829, but made no attempt to join the church. Instead he fell into the hands of the new prophets.

New prophets do not abound in our day. Scarcely do there remain a few strange sects like the Christadelphians or the more bourgeois Theosophists to remind us of the insatiable desire which swept over our fathers for revelation. Joanna Southcote (died 1814) we were reminded of suddenly some nine months ago by a large poster in the London Tubes demanding that "the bishops open Joanna Southcote's box," and curiosity has made some scholars hunt up facts about her. She issued a large number of prophecies and instructions, and moreover left a Church. This was believed to have become practically extinct with the death of J. J. Jezreel, the last prophet, in 1885, but the posters in the Tubes, mentioned above, seem to show that it is still alive.

But Joanna was only the first and greatest of an enormous number of prophets, all of whom met with a considerable success, and left volumes of canonical writings. Lindsay, Boon, George Turner, Ward, John Wroe were perhaps the best known of them. They were mostly in the South-cotian tradition and one at least (John Wroe) was actually in the "Body" as it was called.

They are indeed a strange outgrowth of the suffering and distracted mind of the English lower classes of 1800 to 1840. It is not surprising that the consolations of religion were demanded by the victims of the Industrial Revolution, or that new revelations of heaven were forthcoming. But the character of these later prophecies is strange. They show that nothing was too degraded to achieve success; they explain very easily the energy which Robert Owen put into his secularist campaign. To many of us Owen's rationalism seems only a private foible and a further evidence of the immaturity of his teaching; a study of the popular religious literature of the time shows how necessary and inevitable his propaganda was.

The most surprising of these is perhaps George Turner, whose picture of heaven (the thing most urgently demanded by converts) was of a place in which the power of man and woman to enjoy one another should be increased "and that an hundredfold." The details of his life and of his behaviour towards the female members of his flock may be gathered from his works, where they are sandwiched in between unending calculations concerning the number of the Beast, rant from Isaiah, and prophecies of the end of the world. His lubricity, like that of the other prophets, probably proceeded from insanity. But it is important to observe that although Smith, in an amusing passage which I am afraid to reproduce, pillories Turner's teaching, he nevertheless wrote of Turner's adopted son and Messiah, John Ward, "much of his doctrine I admire as a *principle*." And Smith was an intelligent man.

The particular prophet into whose fold Smith fell was John Wroe, whose followers had to wear beards. Wroe claimed to have succeeded to Joanna Southcote's prophetic power and to have the power of healing. Smith was for a time convinced of his genuineness, but in 1827 and 1830 charges were brought of criminal intercourse and misconduct against him by his domestic servants. A jury of friends was made up at the later date to investigate the charges, and an acquittal was only secured by the expulsion of two members of the jury, of whom one was Smith. He, and many others, now cut off their beards and left Wroe, whose followers made a schism in the Southcotians, and called themselves Christian Israelites.

In 1831, on leaving Wroe, with whom he had been living at Ashton-under-Lyne, Smith returned to Scotland and practised painting, for which he showed a fair talent, in order to get money enough to come down to London and lecture. This he did next year.

He was probably now at the height of his powers. When he left the Wroe church he left behind also his belief in the immediate coming of Christ and in the inspired character of the follies of the new prophets. But the taste for revelation and inspection of the intricacies of the Bible never left him. His character became now sharply divided, so much that one would have said there were two persons. His long, thin, humorous and typically Scotch face truly indicated common sense and ability. No man had a better sense of a jest than Smith. No one was more competent in practical affairs; no one had a clearer head or was a more dangerous adversary. But behind this acute Scotsman was a semi-oriental mystic—a man who had once believed in John Wroe and was now evolving "Universalism," a mystical religion. He still claimed the title Reverend (given him, I believe, by John Wroe), and opened his chapel in London, charging 1d. entrance fee. The Universalism he here preached was continually struggling for the mastery of his mind with the other more mundane Smith. Its character may be gathered from the title of his collected lectures (1833):—

The ANTICHRIST, or Christianity Reformed, in which is demonstrated from the Scriptures, in opposition to the prevailing opinion of the Whole Religious Word, that Evil and Good are from one source; Devil and God one Spirit; and that the one is merely manifested to make perfect the other. By the Rev. J. E. Smith, A.M.

Here is a specimen of his style in elaborating this curious thesis. Even if he was mad, his writing shows he was no fool:—

WAGGERY

The God of the Bible is evidently a wag; he speaks one way and means another; and very often, grave as all the parsons look in the pulpit, is very jocular. Thus, for

instance (Jerem. xxi. 14), speaking of the happiness to which he means hereafter to raise the human race, he says, "And I will satiate the soul of the priest with fatness." This is a capital wipe to our full-fed ecclesiastics and is as good as a hint to them, if their interest would permit them to take it, that the Lord is merely quizzing and scarecrowing them when he preaches so sanctimoniously upon atonement, justification, election, and damnation. And this reminds me of what he is said to have told a certain celebrated Prophetess alluded to in a preceding note, that he was merely jesting with men in the Gospel, to try the wisdom of the pretended wise men. She believed this; but when the Devil told her that God was a d—d liar, she was quite shocked. However, it would be a very difficult task to refute this accusation of the Devil's from the Bible, since we have so many of the Lord's own confessions to corroborate it. Whereas the Devil himself, in the sacred writings, stands quite irreproachable; he gets an abusive name now and then, certainly, but nicknames are no proof against a man's character; yet a bad name is all that the clergy can allege against the Devil. How would they themselves like to be all strung up like a parcel of dried haddocks, merely because some malicious persons gave them the nickname of rascals; yet this would only be serving them as they have served the Devil. If a dog gets a bad name they say you may hang it, for nobody will believe any good of it afterwards. Poor Devil! He has been sadly abused and maltreated, all by that waggish elder brother of his; who, like the ladies, as Dr. Goldsmith avers, always means No when he says Yes and Yes when he says No (p. 14).

Or if anyone knows of a copy of *Antichrist* let him read pp. 94 onwards, for a brilliant piece of writing which a modern clergyman (quite wrongly) would call indecent.

But already Smith was feeling very strongly the influence of Robert Owen, whose meetings he was diligently attending and whose denunciation of the effects of the capitalist system appealed to the saner side of him. Even in *Antichrist* (p. 80) he wrote:—

"The Lord forbade the Israelites to bring wages of a whore or the price of a dog into the sanctuary." But the parsons are contented to live on funds more dishonourably acquired than by selling dogs or female smiles—they live on the wages of hypocrisy and imposture and suck the blood of the poor by feeding upon those funds which were originally collected from a charitable and generous public under the pretext of relieving the necessities of the needy. Thus we see that whilst the first apostles sold their property to give to the poor, the modern apostles *take it back from the poor* and convert to their own use. Is not this the spirit of what they call Antichrist? It is better to be Antichrist in name only than Antichrist in reality.

It is clear from this that even in 1832 he was turning his attention from Gnostic fancies to the realities of the oppression about him, and as soon as he did that, the victory of the saner side of his character was assured. The change was caused by the lectures of Robert Owen, whom he assiduously followed at this time. Owen was at his best period. He had ceased the foundation of model communities, and had come into contact, through the "Labour Exchanges," with the actual proletariat. His power of analysing and denouncing the evils of capitalism and competition was at its highest; his preoccupation with secularism and moral instruction had not yet become an obsession. Smith was recognised by him and others as a most valuable ally, and became second only to Owen himself in the movement, lecturing alternately with him at the Charlotte Street Institute. Moreover, on September 22nd, 1833, Smith took over the editorship of the *Crisis*, the official Owenite journal, which had fallen to the miserable circulation of 1,250. It is significant of his ability that the circulation of the paper went up at once and maintained for six months a high rate of increase.

R. W. POSTGATE

(To be concluded.)

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