

# THE JOURNAL

OF THE

## FRIENDS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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### Our Bibliographers

#### III. JOSEPH SMITH, 1819-1896<sup>1</sup>

##### HIS LIFE

**S**OME seven years ago the Editors of THE JOURNAL proposed to publish in succession notices of three bibliographers—John Whiting, Morris Birkbeck, and Joseph Smith.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst mention of the first takes us back to the early days of the Society, of the second to the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth, the third was one whose personality was familiar to many of our readers, and whose work will remain a monument of literary industry through centuries yet to be. Were the Society of Friends ever to be merged into a Christian federation wherein sectarian distinctions no longer separated one body from another, the student of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century history, biography, literature and sociology would still turn to Joseph Smith's famous *Catalogue of Friends' Books* for material to be found nowhere else without difficult search.

The life of Joseph Smith, apart from his work, affords little to chronicle. He was the son of Jonathan Smith<sup>3</sup> and of Elizabeth his wife, who at one time were in the

<sup>1</sup> In compiling this sketch the writer has made free use of his own earlier notices of Joseph Smith; see *Report of Ackworth Old Scholars' Association*, 1897.

<sup>2</sup> For John Whiting, see iv. 7, and for Morris Birkbeck see viii. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Formerly of Saffron Walden.

service of Joseph and Elizabeth Fry, and was born at Brook Street, Ratcliff, London, on 14th December, 1819. Amongst his earliest recollections were those of the Friends' Meeting House at the corner of Brook Street and Schoolhouse Lane, built in 1797 on the land purchased by Thomas Yoakley on behalf of Friends in 1666. On this historic site, which had been the scene of violence and tumult in the days of persecution under Sir John Robinson, Friends continue to hold their meetings, and Joseph Smith was attached to Ratcliff Meeting the greater part of his life. He was for a time, in middle life, Clerk of the Preparative Meeting from 1857 to 1871, but as a Friend of the Quietist type with some pertinacity withstood the introduction of modern methods as employed in Mission Meetings. Indeed he carried his obstruction so far as to refuse to give up the Minute Books to his successor. Eventually, having retained possession for twenty-five years after his appointment ceased, he was induced to hand the books to the writer in 1896, and they were deposited with other records belonging to Ratcliff and Barking Monthly Meeting. The fair minute book is a model of neat transcription. Of the Burial Ground adjoining the Meeting House he used to tell some quaint stories. Portions of it had names given by a caretaker, such as "Gold Dust Row," where were the graves of some wealthy Friends; "Dead Man's Corner"; "Mortality Common"; and "Angelical Row," which contained the graves of children. Amongst the graves is that of Joseph Besse, the chronicler of the sufferings of Friends.

Near the Meeting House was the school of the Coopers' Company, where Joseph Smith received his first school instruction. In 1829 he was sent to Ackworth School, and well remembered in after life the long coach ride of about 170 miles from the "Saracen's Head" on Snow Hill. He remained at Ackworth until 1834, and during these five years, the longest time he ever spent out of London, probably did not once return home. What he learned there is not specifically known, but it is not unfair to assume that to his Ackworth training his excellent handwriting, correct spelling and pronunciation combined with accuracy in written or spoken

language, were measurably due. The very slight imperfection in the enunciation of the letter r did not appear to detract from the general effect of his pronunciation. He kept up the use of Friends' "plain language" when conversing with familiar friends of his own persuasion.

On leaving school he was apprenticed to William Grimshaw, a watchmaker, and remained with him seven years. From watches he turned to umbrellas, and spent the next seven years in the employment of John Morland in Eastcheap. In 1846 he was married at the Registry Office, Stepney, to Martha Talbot, who died after a brief married life, leaving no child. In those days the discipline of the Society of Friends was exercised severely against those who married non-members, or who married members contrary to usages. Joseph Smith was guilty on two counts, and when it was reported to the Monthly Meeting that he had married without the knowledge of Friends, two members were appointed to visit him and report the result. He received them "kindly," but they had to report that he had married one not in membership at the Stepney Registry Office, and that evidently he was not so convinced of the "impropriety" of his conduct as his visitors desired. Accordingly Joseph Smith's membership ended on the 22nd September, 1846, by disownment. In the minute in which this was recorded emphasis was laid upon the concern of Friends "to maintain inviolate the religious character" which the Society had ever attached to so important a step as marriage. The minute concluded with the expression of the hope that he might "eventually be reinstated in fellowship with Friends." This pious hope was fulfilled before many years elapsed. Joseph Smith applied for re-instatement in the latter part of 1849, and was re-admitted into membership in February, 1850. It is probable that during the three years in which he was out of membership, he kept in close touch with Friends either in Ratcliff or Westminster.

Leaving umbrellas in Eastcheap, Joseph Smith directed his attention to the study of the literature of the Society of Friends from its earliest days, whether in the form of official documents issued by Yearly, Quarterly or other Meetings on both sides of the Atlantic, or the

issues of individual writers. Not limiting his researches to any special department of Quaker literature, he treated as grist for his mill anything written by a Friend, an ex-Friend, or by writers who had anything to say about Friends—for them or against them. With Charles Gilpin, afterwards M.P. for Nottingham, he opened a book shop in Bedford Street, Strand, but soon afterwards he removed to Oxford Street, Whitechapel, where he remained upwards of forty years. His occupation enabled him readily to carry on the chief work of his life, the compilation of his *Catalogue of Friends' Books*, which, after twenty years of patient preparation, he published in 1867. This will be dealt with in the second portion of this sketch.

He was employed by the Meeting for Sufferings<sup>4</sup> during many years<sup>5</sup> to arrange the accumulation of books and manuscripts which the Society of Friends had been steadily accumulating during two centuries, forming the unique collection at Devonshire House known as The Reference Library. Printed books and sets of minute books presented comparatively little difficulty, but the condition of the manuscripts in general was appalling, and Joseph Smith was almost in despair as he commenced his task. But interest in his work, combined with his systematic habits when at work, was the secret of his success in evolving cosmos out of chaos, and making it easy for anyone continuing his work to follow out his method of arrangement. The foundation thus laid years ago has proved of immense value to the first appointed Librarian, who has carried the work of arrangement and indexing far beyond anything contemplated by Joseph Smith. It may be asked why the latter

<sup>4</sup> The Meeting for Sufferings, the Executive Committee of London Yearly Meeting, had in its early years, in the seventeenth century, for its chief business the succour of Friends suffering persecution by imprisonment or distraint of goods, and thus derived the historic name which it still retains.

<sup>5</sup> He was first employed on catalogue work in January, 1856, and his last account was paid on the 5th September, 1892. His chief continuous work on book catalogue was 1877-1882; on manuscript catalogue, 1888, 1889. His remuneration, which was one shilling per hour, appears small, but it must be remembered that he worked when he pleased, and in his own irregular, fitful manner. As bookseller, he supplied many additions to the Library at fair profit.

was not formally appointed Librarian. Engrossed as he could be when the fit was on him, he could not always be prevailed upon to work, and there was less dependence to be placed upon his regularity as years advanced. William Beck, who yielded to none in his interest in the Library, and in personal kindness to Joseph Smith, used to say that "Joseph" would have been appointed Librarian had his habits been more regular. Up to within a few years of his death he was employed off and on to catalogue congested material, but he became at last, though still sure, very slow. The writer realised this when the copying of some seventeenth century MSS., calculated to occupy twenty hours, actually took Joseph Smith more than forty to accomplish.

Ever ready to converse upon matters connected with the absorbing interest of his life, he took great pains to elucidate any point upon which he was consulted. Familiar with every page of his *Catalogue* down to minute details, he was a walking encyclopædia of Quaker bibliography. With the knowledge of the specialist in one direction he combined the simplicity of the child in others. His business was not a lucrative one, and this circumstance, coupled with improvident ways and generous habits, which made him readily a prey of dishonest people, made his circumstances other than easy in later life. His literary work received a recognition from the "Royal Bounty" three times, each time, as he was rather pleased to say, when a Tory Government was in power. In 1894 an appeal for contributions to a fund to assist him was issued, signed by William Beck, Joseph Bevan Braithwaite and the writer, to which many Friends and others responded with donations or promises of annual subscriptions. He was able to draw upon the fund according to requirements by weekly or special allowances, but it was not long wanted. At the time of his decease, two years later, after the payment of funeral expenses and the cost of a simple gravestone as customary in Friends' Burial Grounds, the balance was, with the consent of the donors, applied to the relief of other Friends in necessitous circumstances.

In appearance Joseph Smith was short, but stoutly and squarely built, with a good head and kindly

expression; careless as to his attire, he exposed himself to rain and cold, disdaining the use of an overcoat, even during the severe frost of 1894-5, though seventy-five years of age. During the later period of his residence at Oxford Street, Whitechapel, he lived a hermit life. For years before he left his shop in 1895 the shutters were not taken down from window or door, and the latter was without bell or knocker. If anyone rapped he opened the door cautiously a few inches, before deciding whether to accord admission. Inside the house, books were piled up from floor to ceiling, and the visitor who was allowed to enter threaded his way with difficulty through the dusty tomes. An American lady who visited him said that his dwelling reminded her of such places as Dickens might have described, more than any place she had seen before. She much enjoyed her conversation with him and his prompt reply when she claimed to be of the family of the "Long-Mournful and Sorely-Distressed Isaac Penington"—"But thy name is not Penington." He often received visits from American Friends with whom he had corresponded, both of the "Orthodox" and "Hicksite" branches, but he had more sympathy with the views of the latter than of the former.

Year by year Joseph Smith's stock depreciated in value as he lived upon it whilst making few additions to it, and when at last he was induced by a relation to part with what was left and leave Whitechapel, no large sum was realised by the sale. The stock was mainly bought by one purchaser, and after a further weeding-out process, a remainder was again sold and the final dissipation of the tail-end of the collection took place.

Joseph Smith left London for a time, and lived with relatives in the country. But he was essentially a town bird, and the kind care expended over him was insufficient compensation for the breaking up of old habits of life and the withdrawal from accustomed haunts. He was requested to give evidence in an important privately-conducted investigation at Devonshire House. He came back to London improved in outward appearance, well groomed in comparison with the past, and wearing linen fresh from the hands of the laundress. When, however, his mission was ended, nothing would induce him

to leave the Metropolis again. For the balance of his days he lived in lodgings in Dakin Street, Stepney.

His life ended suddenly on Christmas Eve, 1896, at the age of seventy-seven years, and the intelligence was quickly communicated to the writer, who made arrangements for the funeral. As no medical man was in attendance at the time of decease an inquest was held, at which the Coroner read portions of a kindly letter found in Joseph Smith's pocket from William Beck, the Coroner's near neighbour as it happened, couched in Quaker speech and enclosing a nice sum of money as a Christmas gift. His Post Office Bank book was also produced, showing that he had at the time enough on hand to meet his modest requirements for several months. His possessions were handed over to a nephew, who took out letters of administration. On the 29th December his remains were interred in the Friends' Burial Ground, Wanstead, in the presence of a small company of Friends. The service at the grave and in the Meeting House was such as he would have wished. Isaac Sharp, then in his ninety-first year, took part in it, and it was almost the last occasion on which he attended a meeting.

### HIS WORKS

From Joseph Smith's life we turn to his works, and to his *magnum opus* itself for an introduction to these. His first sale catalogue was issued in 1846; supplements appeared in 1847. In 1849 he issued *A Catalogue of Friends' Books Ancient and Modern*, which he re-issued with a longer title the same year. Various catalogues not enumerated were issued between 1846 and 1867, and in 1850 one appeared with the addition of "a Collection of Adversaries' Writings." All these led up to the *Descriptive Catalogue*<sup>6</sup> issued in two volumes in 1867. In this work of 2,012 pages, we find massed

<sup>6</sup> A Descriptive Catalogue of Friends' Books, or Books written by Members of the Society of Friends, commonly called Quakers, from their first Rise to the present Time, interspersed with critical Remarks, and occasional Biographical Notices, and including all Writings by Authors before joining, and by those after having left the Society, whether adverse or not, as far as known.

London: Joseph Smith, 2, Oxford Street, Whitechapel, E.  
The price was three pounds.

together an array of names of authors, titles and dates of works, including all editions as far as possible, together with valuable biographical and historical notes. It is a rare occurrence to meet with a book belonging to the first two centuries of Quakerism that escaped Joseph Smith's notice. How he got together all his information is a matter of amazement, and, as has already been mentioned, the knowledge that he retained to the end of his life of the contents of his great work was extraordinary. To this worthy successor of John Whiting and Morris Birkbeck must be accorded the first place amongst Quaker Bibliographers. In connection with these three mention must also be made of John Thompson, of Hitchin, who materially assisted Joseph Smith in his researches, and to whose valuable collection of books he had free access. The *Catalogue* met with much commendation and was widely circulated. With pardonable pride its compiler used to say that it was to be found in every great library from the Vatican to Washington, and that no volume of the *National Dictionary of Biography* had appeared without containing some reference to it. Dr. Richard Garnett, "Keeper of Printed Books," wrote from the British Museum, under date 13th March, 1897:—

I am glad to hear that you are writing on the late Mr. Joseph Smith. He deserves high honour for his bibliographical labours, especially the "Descriptive Catalogue of Friends' Books," and the "Bibliotheca Anti-Quakeriana." Both, and especially the latter, where he had no old foundation to build upon, are models of painstaking and accurate research, and invaluable for the light they throw upon highly interesting but outlying departments of literature, which, but for him, would have been very obscure. At present, any investigator of early Quaker literature may consult Mr. Smith's bibliographies with the assurance of in all probability finding what he requires.

The following, from the pen of William C. Westlake, which appeared in *The Friends' Quarterly Examiner*, 1868, will give some notion of Smith's great work:—

We have, firstly, the author's name, and residence when known, specification of his writings, date of publication, size of book, and number of sheets, coupled not unfrequently with a short biographical record. . . . To those who rejoice in statistics we may state that, dividing the period into half-centuries, we find the number of authors and books recorded in these volumes to be as follows:—



1650-1700	715 authors,	6,092 publications.
1700-1750	266 „	1,887 „
1750-1800	254 „	2,024 „
1800-1850	771 „	5,574 „
1850-1867	168 „	1,027 „
	<hr/> 2,174	<hr/> 16,604

The description of the works of George Fox occupies thirty-three pages, that of the works of William Penn forty-four pages, and the literature of the Keithian Controversy thirty-two pages.

In 1873 Joseph Smith issued his *Bibliotheca Anti-Quakeriana*,<sup>7</sup> to which special allusion is made in the letter of Dr. Garnett, quoted above. It gives valuable biographical notices of authors, and mentions many works written in refutation of opponents. This work, by no means so well known as the *magnum opus*, contains about 480 pages, wherein are noted many curiosities of literature. Few will now read the works of Charles Leslie, the author of *The Snake in the Grass*, but he occupies eight pages. The Snake controversy continued from 1696 to 1702, Leslie's antagonists being chiefly Whitehead, Scoryer, Wyeth, and a clergyman named Elys. Though the works of the controversialists themselves may lie unheeded on the library shelves, the titles of them will at least be found quaint and illustrative of the times in which they were written.

In 1893 appeared a *Supplement* to the Descriptive Catalogue of 1867 of some 360 pages, a useful addendum and no mean production for a man of seventy-four years of age. In it appears, under the author's name, "Bibliotheca Quakeristica: A Bibliography of Miscellaneous Literature relating to the Friends (Quakers)," etc., 1883. Unhappily only two sheets were printed off, and the manuscript has disappeared. Whether it is still in existence is not known.

Amongst the smaller issues of Joseph Smith's pen may be mentioned: *The Society of Friends*, Robert

<sup>7</sup> *Bibliotheca Anti-Quakeriana*; or, a Catalogue of Books adverse to the Society of Friends, with Biographical Notices of the Authors, together with the Answers which have been given to some of them by Friends and others.

London: Joseph Smith, 6, Oxford Street, Whitechapel, E.  
The price was eighteen shillings.

*Barclay and Hai Ebn Yokdan*, dealing with an interesting literary episode; short biographical notices of the early Pennsylvanian printers, Reinier Jansen, Andrew Bradford, and Samuel Keimer, whose printed works now realise prices which the printers themselves would have considered fabulous; also his share in the *Biographical Catalogue of Friends whose Portraits are in the London Friends' Institute*, 1888.

And now we reluctantly bid farewell to the worthy old bookman. He had his foibles, and who has not? They were the weaknesses of an erratic genius, trifling in comparison with his solid work. For his literary legacy we are thankful, and we hold him in happy memory.

*London.*

ISAAC SHARP.

#### NOTE.

The Editor, as Librarian of the Devonshire House Reference Library, wishes to emphasize the statement made on page 4 of the value of Joseph Smith's labours. The present work done in D. would have been well-nigh impossible without Smith's Catalogues.

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9 mo. 1683. Trading in the time of the halfe years Meeting to be avoided by friends concerned in the service of it, as well those of the Country as those of the Cittie of Dublin that the mindes of friends may nott be Cumbered about such things when they should be Concerned about the Lords Business.

MINUTE OF THE NATIONAL HALF-YEARS MEETING held in Dublin.

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A good old Quaker preacher who experienced a hard time being humble, had the habit of concluding any narrative regarding his unquestioned good work by adding, "Well, after all, I am only a poor weak creature," with large accent on the "poor" and "weak." An old acquaintance was annoyed by this, to his mind, fictitious humility, and resolved to stop it. He did not have long to wait. One day the preacher, returning from a particularly prosperous religious trip, told his friend with great gusto of his success, concluding his story by saying, "After all, I am only a poor creature."

"Why," replied his friend, "only the other day I heard somebody say that thou wast a poor creature."

Quick as a flash shot back the demand, "Who was it?"

Was that not a lovely touch of human nature?

WILLIAM C. ALLEN in *The Westonian*, 11 mo., 1913.