

A (CONTEMPORARY) BOY'S EYE VIEW OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



The Reuben Smith house, 74 North St., in Litchfield, Conn., boyhood home of Elihu Hubbard Smith; and on occasion still up for sale as a private residence.¹

I myself only first learned of Elihu Hubbard Smith (4 Sept. 1771-19 Sept. 1798) while reading about Charles Brockden Brown,² Joseph Dennie, and later on as well William Dunlap; all of whom were part of Smith's circle; with Smith acting as a friend, confidante, and mentor of the latter's literary and artistic efforts. Although these three subsequently gained the (albeit rather tenuous) public notoriety and limelight, that effectively eluded him, Smith was a distinctly remarkable, if unfinished (as in "work in progress") genius in his own right. In fact, it is only now, over 130 to 200 years later, that scholars have begun, and are beginning, to realize and understand this, while unearthing and re-discovering much of his previously lost output as an author.

Son of an apothecary and originally from Litchfield, Connecticut and who was one of the youngest admittees and graduates Yale ever had, Smith is a most unusual figure in the history of American Letters in that he attempted to practice medicine while endeavoring to pursue a career as a poet, essayist, and social and cultural visionary. After Yale, he studied under Timothy Dwight at the latter's Greenfield Hill school, and later went to Philadelphia to take some pre-med courses under Benjamin Rush. States James E. Cronin, editor of Smith's *Diary* "Strictly speaking he [Smith] was never a doctor," and this because he did not formally pursue getting the necessary degrees. In one diary entry, Smith in part explains by chiding himself for "indolence and gossiping;" that is, perhaps spending too much time corresponding with literary and medical friends and having long sessions and extended conversations and get-togethers with fellow Friendly club members in New York (city); where he'd made his home.

Despite his not sticking with the formal training, Smith continued to be intrigued and preoccupied with medical matters; while regularly prescribing and caring for patients as a learned student and zealous amateur. While it was common then for many a jaded law student to strike it out in literature, for a prospective physician to do so was more of a rarity; though we might think of Benjamin Rush to an extent as an somewhat exception also. Simultaneously Smith was an Enlightenment Age progressive who, and allowing for some understandable reservations, believed in the ultimate perfectibility of man, and which included Smith's being a meticulous medical observer and, at the same time, an active proponent of polite literature. Although his adamant Deism tended to dismay colleagues, being like Brown an enthusiast of Godwin, he was an active advocate for abolition ("manumission," however, being the term then most used)

¹ See, as of 24 June 2019:

https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-detail/74-North-St_Litchfield_CT_06759_M34587-70906 and <http://www.klemmrealestate.com/cmsAdmin/uploads/b0010591.pdf>

² Smith read and was acquainted with Brown's earliest work, including *Sky-Walk* (1797, now lost), *Wieland*, *Memoirs of Carwin*, and *Steven Calvert*.

and little short of tireless in his altruism; giving of his time, and eventually even his very life, in the service of others.

Indeed his early death in 1798 came about as a result of his charitably taking a Yellow Fever victim into his cramped home and himself contracting the disease in the process. In a letter to his [Brown's] brother, Brockden Brown, who resided with Smith and later saw to his funeral, wrote the day after his passing:

“Thursday morning. The die is cast. E. H. S. is dead. O the folly of prediction and the vanity of systems.”³

As Smith saw it, polite literature was itself a kind of medicine; that is, a salve and restorative for the soul and for moral character. While *most* noted as the compiler and editor of the first anthology of American Poetry (1793), Smith did publish an (albeit not terribly interesting) opera “Edwin and Angelina” and helped to establish, along with physicians Samuel L. Mitchell and Edwin Miller, the somewhat successful periodical *Medical Repository*. As well he wrote several poems of his own, including sonnets, and for which Smith's productions were something of an American first. A few pieces of his verse do in fact show promise and merit, as in this fragment reproduced for publication by Marcia Edgerton Bailey in the late 1920s:

“High up the heavens the Sun in radiance moves,
Gilding thy varied beauties, happy *Place*,
Whose charms by birth and time endeared, my spirit loves,
And mourning leaves, a distant way to trace.
Now let me check the rising sigh,
To mark, with melancholy eye,
Thy scenes which lingering, from my view retire;
Thy domes, slow-moving from the sight,
Thy *Lake*, which gleams a fainting light;
Thy dim discovered spire,
Dear scenes of youthful joy - farewell!”⁴

Unfortunately a large quantity of his writings, and which reportedly (by those who knew it) included some of his best work, were destroyed in a fire after his early death; so that his known literary achievements, and outside his anthology, opera, and prefatory poem to Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden* (American edition), have been generally view as fairly negligible, at least to non-specialists and in comparison to some of his more well known literary associates and contemporaries, and who themselves became obscured and overshadowed by later authors like Irving, Cooper, Bryant, et al.

A bombshell in Smith scholarship and appreciation came about however in 1973 with the publishing of his *Diary*, along with other and accompanying extant pieces, by editor James E. Cronin. This volume turns out to be a most surprising and extraordinary treasure, and that frequently shows Smith in a

³ Quoted in *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown*, vol 2, p. 10, by William Dunlap.

Dunlap: “Brown had been himself attacked by the first symptoms of the fatal disease, and was removed to the house of the same friend who now received the unfortunate Smith. Brown's symptoms yielded to medicine, not so his friend's; he lingered a few days in a state allied to stupor; the efforts of his medical friends Miller and Mitchill were utterly unavailing; he saw the last symptom of the disease, black vomit, pronounced the word ‘decomposition’ and died.

“Thus perished, on Wednesday the twenty-first of September, 1798, in the twenty-seventh year of his age, Elihu Hubbard Smith; a man whose whole ambition was to increase his intellectual powers, with a view of devoting them to his fellow men...” *Ibid.* pp 8-9.

Smith was interred at the First Presbyterian Churchyard in lower Manhattan. The church was, by 1844, later relocated, razed, and put up for sale. What became of the graves and burial vaults after demolition is unknown; except that it is fully possible Smith's remains today lie under a NYC parking lot.

⁴ From “Ode Written on Leaving the Place of my Nativity;” and taken here from “A Lesser Hartford Wit, Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith” by Marcia Edgerton Bailey, (Orono, Maine, 1928), n. 26 Issue 11 of *Univ. of Maine Studies*, 2d Series, p. 44.

light hitherto never even hinted at. For example, there has been and still is this tendency to depict him as a composer of dull and predictable 18th century poetry; a dry clinical observer and theorist, or, recently as per Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan in her otherwise illuminating and worthwhile *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forms of Citizenship* (2008), a rather flighty, albeit sincere and well meaning, utopian visionary. Yet the more I myself delved into Cronin's edition of the *Diary* (and there is so much to this large yet fascinating and attention engrossing volume that I am *far* from being done with it), he evinces a very warm, personally reflective, and sometimes humorous side. As a portrait of Smith and his circle in and around Yellow Fever plagued New York City circa 1795-1798 (the diary's last entry is dated just a few days before his death), the book is both a priceless record of those times and at the same time often unusually entertaining reading.

"Notes from Recollections of My Life," and which Cronin has prefacing the main diary text, is an extremely touching autobiography of Smith's childhood, touching that is particularly given his early death. In some ways "Notes" is reminiscent of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; as a narrative of his earliest development while containing colorful memories, sketches, and fond and not so fond remembrances of people and occurrences he knew in his youth. For instance also, Smith is a man after my own heart where at one point he effusively and elsewhere uncharacteristically describes his continued relish for certain children's books; such as *Entertaining Stories*, published by Newberry and with its tales like Jack Hick-a-Thrift (a Jack the Giant Killer legend) or Valentine and Orson (a medieval romance), and *The Fool of Quality* (1767) by Henry Brooke. And there is much more and else to the "Notes;" not least of which his recollections of the Revolutionary War as it unfolded around him as toddler and elementary school student, and which we here present for some who will no doubt find this amusing and of interest.

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July 4th, 1776, the Congress made the Declaration of Independence. The spirit of opposition was now at its height & military ardor persuaded all ranks, ages, & sexes...One fine afternoon, the Scholars resolved to erect a Liberty-Pole. A long, dry maple stick the size of a man's arm was selected for the purpose; and we designed to support [it] by a number of stones at the lower end. They were insufficient., It was agreed, however, that if the end were first sharpened, it might be thrust some way into the earth, & then the stones would answer. The whole school, boys & girls, were assembled. One ran for an axe; & the important business of sharpening the pole was entrusted to my execution. I seized the ax, with equal patriotism and eagerness; placed my left foot on the stick, to keep it from rolling; and began to cut. The wood was hard, & had made but small progress in the business, when the axe glanced, & nearly deprived me of the great toe of my left foot. It was near my father's; & the affectionate Olive & one of her sisters supported me & bore me in their arms to his house; the whole train following. The cut bled much; but on examination, the joint proved to be uninjured; my father divided the skin which held the separated [sic] piece; the foot as bound up; and all laws right again. The boys proceeded to erect the liberty-pole; and Liberty was triumphant...

Sept. 1776...

The military spirit was now fast increasing. In every town the boys formed themselves into companies, were provided with light wooden guns, & all the apparatus of war. I remember our dress, arms, exercises, the officers, the evolutions, & all the people. We had four companies, which when collected, amounted to more than a hundred. Two drums, five fifes, & four standards, gave life and splendour to our exhibitions. The regular soldiery of the country often took pleasure in instructing us; & we were trained, by frequent mock engagements. These were the schools for the Army; & many of the children then directing these little maneuvers, afterwards engaged 'in ruder conflicts & more glorious fields.'

Sept. 1777: Six [years of age]. I was now old enough to understand something of the nature of the contest my country was engaged in, & made three attempts to escape from home, & accompany the soldiers to the field. My last was this Autumn, with a party who were marching northward to join Genl. Gates. This party was from Middletown. Fourteen of them stayed at my father's. I recollect the faces, names, & even the arms of several of them: so powerfully was my mind interested by every thing which related to war. When they left Litchfield, I set forward with them, & actually kept pace for near a mile; when I was overtaken & much against my will dropped home. Burgoyne surrendered...

Sept. 1778: - *Seven*. At Mr. N. Baldwin's School I improved rapidly in reading, writing, & speaking. We had a quarter-day, which far exceeded any that had gone before. It may be necessary, for the information of that friend who may chance to peruse these notes, to be informed that the quarter-day was, as the name imports, a day set apart every three months, for the examination of the pupils in the presence of their parents and friends, in the acting of short dialogues, in which sometimes a few, & sometimes many persons were engaged. On the present occasion, I delivered the Soliloquy of Cato [from Joseph Addison's play], with a broken sword, mended by splints of pine, secured with pack-thread. In the spring, a party of troops had passed thro' town to join the Army; for Lichfield was on the great road to Camp, had in it a garrison, a depot for military stores & was the seat of the Commissariate, for furnishing the soldiers with food, clothing, ammunition &c. The men were always freely recd. into the houses of the inhabitants; & of the party now mentioned several lodged at my father's - & among the rest a Lieutenant - who having broken his small sword by accident gave it to me: & and with this very sword, mended as I have described, did I enact Cato, with much applause.

My sister Mary now declaimed for the first time; & tho' I have never seen the lines since, they are correctly impress on my memory. They were a Toast, from some News-Paper, on the Capture of Burgoyne, are as follow[s].

Success to the States,
And the brave General Gates
Who fought with courage so fine,
In the year seventy seven,
By the blessing of Heaven,
He conquered the haughty Burgoyne.

Sept. 1780.-*Nine*. It was this autumn, I suspect, that I first saw the illustrious Washington. Then too, and then only, I saw La Fayette, who was with him. Of the first, I have a perfect recollection, as he then appeared. I remember the air with which he mounted his horse-a fine bay- the furniture without lace or other ornament; & the saddle covered by a black bearskin. Characteristic simplicity! I did not see the countenance of Fayette, distinctly enough, to call it to mind. But his person, his horse, & the rich trappings with which he was decorated, still possess a place in my memory. The spring following, Washington again passed thro' Lichfield [sic]. I remembered to have carried to him a small basket of excellent apples: a rare present for the season; for it was in May [editor Cronin, in a footnote p. 28, determines the date to have been 9 May 1781]. He lodged at a house opposite my father's. When I went over he had walked up the street; but Genl. Knox, the french [sic] Genl. Duportail (I believe) and there aides de camp were there. They learnt my errand, and endeavored to prevail on me to distribute my fruit before the return of the Commander in Chief. I was not to be prevailed upon. While I awaited the return of the Genl. & examined some large salmon in the back room, one of Genl. W.'s aides - and from my recollection of his size and appearance, I suspect Col. Hamilton, - entered. This was fated to be a day of mortification to me, as well as of triumph, I had objected to performing my errand in the clothes I had on; for it was Saturday, & I was dirty. But my parents would not indulge my pride. It was soon to receive a severer shock. The officer who now entered, knew my errand, & began to converse with me. He asked of my studies. I was vain of the smattering I had of *latin*, & my vanity led me to return too indefinite answers to his inquiries; so that he was induced to believe my proficiency greater than it really was. He began to examine me; but, unfortunately, my question respected a part of Corderius which I had not then read. I stammered, blushed, blundered-& finally was forced to acknowledge my ignorance. He recommended it to me to be more thorough and careful in future. A useful lesson; for which I thank him; and which, from the attendant circumstance, was too profoundly engraven on my memory soon to be forgotten. At length, the Commander in Chief came. I made known my business, & presented my fruit. With what a look did he accept my proffered present! It penetrated to my soul! It was full of kindness, full of complacency. Exalted Man! wast thou not born to sway the minds of men with glowing, yet serene admiration? I was led by the Genl. into the room where his officers were assembled; & the fruit was shared with them. The caresses bestowed on me were too flattering not to be lastingly remembered. I forgot, for a few moments, my shabby appearance & my examination. They were about to depart; their horses ready, & they mounted. There was something characteristic in the manner of their taking their leave. Washington smiled upon me: Know said 'farewell to my little prince': The French General bowed: two of the aids stroked my head: &

my Examiner shook my hand. I remember every circumstance with luminous exactitude. I went home with mingled emotions of mortification & transport...

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