

Selected Letters of William Robertson Smith

Edited by
BERNHARD MAIER



Mohr Siebeck

William Robertson Smith
Selected Letters





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Edited by

Bernhard Maier

in Collaboration with

Astrid Hess and Gordon K. Booth

Mohr Siebeck

Bernhard Maier, born 1963; studied Comparative Religion, Indo-European and Semitic Linguistics and Celtic Philology at the Universities of Freiburg, Aberystwyth, Bonn and London; 1989 PhD; 1998 second doctorate (Habilitation); 1999–2004 Heisenberg Scholarship, 2004–2006 Reader and Professor in Celtic at the University of Aberdeen; currently Professor of Religious Studies and the European History of Religions at the University of Tübingen.

ISBN 978-3-16-156732-2 / eISBN 978-3-16-156733-9
DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-156733-9

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was typeset by epline in Böblingen, printed on non-aging paper by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen, and bound by Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

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Preface

Habent sua fata libelli. My interest in William Robertson Smith was first kindled in 1982–83, when I read Eric Sharpe's *Comparative Religion: A History* and *The Life of William Robertson Smith* by John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal. Like many students of *Religionswissenschaft*, I intermittently heard and read about Smith ever since, but my early interest in his biography was fundamentally rekindled in 2004, when I was appointed Reader in Celtic at the University of Aberdeen and subsequently visited many places associated with Smith's life and work. It was then that I first established contact with Mrs. Astrid Hess, a great-grandniece of William Robertson Smith, and Dr. Gordon K. Booth, who had written a PhD thesis on Smith's formative early years. Together they had just published *Children of the Manse* (Edinburgh: Bellfield Press, 2004), an account of the Smith family based on the childhood recollections of William's younger sister Alice.

Having learnt of my interest in Smith's biography, Mrs. Hess very kindly supplied scans not only of the manuscript and typewritten originals of Alice's childhood memoirs, but also of the numerous letters, photographs, newspaper cuttings, official documents, books and pamphlets which she had managed to assemble over the years. Many photographs of letters had come from Professor Robert Segal (then at Lancaster University, now at the University of Aberdeen), who in turn had got them from Robert Ackerman, the biographer of Smith's friend James George Frazer. From 2006, after I had been appointed Professor of Religious Studies in the University of Tübingen, I managed to find many more letters in various British and Continental libraries, and on the basis of this material I wrote *William Robertson Smith: his life, his work and his times* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). This was meant to supplement the 1912 biography of Black and Chrystal, covering in some more detail both Smith's childhood and early upbringing and his seminal contributions to Semitic Studies, Social Anthropology and Comparative Religious Studies. A by-product of my research in the background of Smith's work was an interest in two of his orientalist colleagues, William Wright (1830–89) and Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930), which subsequently led to the publication of *Semitic Studies in Victorian Britain: a portrait of William*

Wright and his world through his letters (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011) and *Gründerzeit der Orientalistik: Theodor Nöldekes Leben und Werk im Spiegel seiner Briefe* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2013).

The present volume contains more than 400 letters and postcards out of ca. 500 that have become known to me. They span the period from February 1863 to March 1894, the number of items per year varying considerably, from one or two for the first three years to forty-six for the year 1877. I did not include letters and postcards which could not be dated, whose recipients could not be identified, which were too short and cryptic to be intelligible, or which I deemed to be devoid of any biographical interest, being chiefly or exclusively concerned with matters relating to the recipient rather than to the sender. For the provision of scans or photocopies and the permission to include items in their possession, I would like to thank The Sir Duncan Rice Library, Aberdeen; Mrs. Astrid Hess, Beilstein; Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz; Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn, Handschriftenabteilung; the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest; the Syndics of Cambridge University Library; the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge; National Library of Ireland (Dublin); National Library of Scotland (Edinburgh), Archives and Manuscript Collections; Edinburgh University Library, Centre for Research Collections; Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg, Frankfurt am Main; Universitätsbibliothek der Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen; Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen, Handschriften und Seltene Drucke; Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt in Halle (Saale), Bibliothek der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft; University College London Library, Special Collections; Leeds University Library, Special Collections; Universitaire Bibliotheken Leiden; Bodleian Library, Oxford, Special Collections; Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen.

All items were transcribed with a view to faithfully reproducing their outward appearance, including idiosyncracies of spelling and punctuation. Thus abbreviations were not expanded, and underlined words or letters are reproduced in italics. Where a semicolon, dash, quotation mark or question mark appeared to be missing, it was supplied in square brackets, but no attempt was made to make good for the conspicuous lack of commas. Smith's habit of indicating the end of a sentence by ending the last word with a flourish rather than adding a full stop could obviously not be reproduced in print. Thus more than two thousand missing full stops were supplied without more ado, as it would have looked odd to put them all in square brackets, while leaving them out altogether would seriously have impaired the reading. Misspellings and grammatical misconstructions are followed

by [*sic*], although in some cases where a single word appears to have been omitted inadvertently this was simply supplied within square brackets. In general I have sought to retain the division of a text into paragraphs, although occasionally two or more very short paragraphs were conflated into one in order to save space. The notes are largely confined to identifying the recipients of the letters and those individuals that are of interest in the context of Smith's biography. In some instances, the reader is referred to relevant passages in the two biographies by John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (henceforth *LWRS*) and Bernhard Maier, *William Robertson Smith: His life, his work and his times* (henceforth *WRS*).

The publication of the present volume of *Selected Letters of William Robertson Smith* coincides with the 23rd Congress of the International Organization of the Study of the Old Testament in Aberdeen and the 125th anniversary of Smith's death. It is hoped that the volume will stimulate further research and serve to keep alive the memory of what may justly be regarded as the formative period of modern Old Testament Scholarship, Social Anthropology and Comparative Religious Studies. Most of the letters dating from the period of Smith's student years (1863–70) had already been transcribed and annotated by Dr. Booth, who sadly did not live to see the publication of this book, and Mrs. Hess, who brought her intimate knowledge of the Smith family history to bear on the project. For the present edition I have gratefully used their transcripts, collating them carefully with scans of the letters and correcting some minor oversights. Mrs. Hess read a large part of the manuscript, discussing interpretations and suggesting various additions to the notes. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for any shortcomings that remain.

The letters

1863–02–23

from Aberdeen to his father¹

My Dear Papa²

On Saturday Morning we went as you know on a walk with Professor Nicol.³ We had a very pleasant forenoon examining the rocks, sea animals and so on.

I was rather amused to see the way in which Nicol extolled one particular vein of feldspar. He said he had taken a German naturalist to see it in the autumn who had told him he had been over all Scotland geologising but had not seen anything so fine. I got a specimen of it and some other minerals. After coming home from our walk we tried a mathematical paper which we got the loan of from Minto⁴ some weeks ago but had not had time to look at. It was one of the old five hour papers and I think stiffer than the ones he gives now. We did it all in rather more than 4 hours and a half. There was however one deduction which we knew before having done it for Fuller⁵ this winter. Had we not known it I doubt whether we could have managed in the time for it was a rather difficult one.

- 1 Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Papers of William Robertson Smith (henceforth CUL), MS Add. 7476, M1 (typescript copy). This is the first of Smith's letters while he was a student at the University of Aberdeen, living away from home in the company of his brother George and his two sisters Mary Jane and Isabella.
- 2 William Pirie Smith (1811–90) was born at Aberdeen, the second of three children of the ropemaker Gilbert Smith and his wife Mary Michie. He left school at the age of thirteen, started an apprenticeship as a wood-turner in 1825 and worked in that trade until 1832. From 1832 he studied at King's College, Aberdeen, living on his earnings as a private tutor. Having graduated M. A., he worked as a school teacher, first in Kincardine O'Neil and then at the Aberdeen West End Academy. Having married Jane Robertson in 1842, he was licensed as a minister in 1844 and ordained in Keig and Tough, Aberdeenshire, in 1845. He died in 1890.
- 3 James Nicol (1810–79), Professor of Natural History at Marischal College and then at the University of Aberdeen from 1853 to 1878.
- 4 William Minto (1845–93), a fellow-student of William Robertson Smith, later Regius Professor of Logic and English Literature at the University of Aberdeen.
- 5 Frederick ("Freddy") Fuller (1819–1909), Professor of Mathematics at King's College and then at the University of Aberdeen from 1851 to 1878.

We got back our Algebra examination papers from Freddy this afternoon and neither had any marks. I think too that we had written as much in the time as any in the class. Has the rumour that Prince Alfred is dead reached you yet? It is said that a telegram to that effect reached Aberdeen today but we are not quite sure if it be true yet. If it be it will be a great victory of Zadkiel's Almanac which prophesied that the Prince of Wales' marriage would be put off.⁶ Mary Jane⁷ finished her drawing today and is going down to Gifford with it. Isabella⁸ today is first in Bible and Geography and second in English. We are all quite well here and with love to all I am

Your affectionate son,
Wm Robertson Smith

P. S. The parcel of books arrived on Saturday night.

1864–05–09 from Keig to Archibald McDonald⁹

My Dear Archie¹⁰

I fear there is no hope of Mary Jane's recovery. The fever has been only secondary and her disease is rapid consumption. Within the last two or three days she is very much wasted & changed in appearance. But she is quite calm & composed and is prepared to die. Either Papa or Mamma¹¹ sits with her constantly and she cares for nothing so much as to listen to Papa while he repeats verses from the bible. She takes no interest in anything but the Bible. She told Mamma that she was glad that she had been brought through so severe an illness – that it was well worth it all to gain the happiness that she

⁶ "Zadkiel" was the pseudonym of the English astrologer Richard James Morrison (1795–1874). His *Almanac* was first published in 1831 as *The Herald of Astrology*.

⁷ Mary Jane Smith (1845–64), the first child of William Pirie Smith and his wife.

⁸ Isabella Giles ("Bella") Smith (1849–1938), the fourth child and second oldest daughter of William Pirie Smith and his wife.

⁹ CUL, MS Add. 7449, C50.

¹⁰ Archibald McIntyre McDonald (1846–1907), the son of Alexander McDonald and his wife Margaret Marjory Yeats, later became an advocate (see John Alexander Henderson, *History of the Society of Advocates in Aberdeen*, Aberdeen 1912). He was a lifelong friend of William Robertson Smith, but only seven letters to him, written between 1864 and 1868, appear to be extant.

¹¹ Jane Robertson (1821–99) was the daughter of the grammar school director Peter Robertson and his wife Isabella Giles, a sister of the landscape painter James Giles (1801–70).

had gained. It is still possible perhaps that she may rally but we can hardly dare to hope so. She is so weak that it seems a question of days or even hours how long she may live. D^r Williamson will see her again to-morrow. Do not blame me for writing to you thus. On Saturday I was hopeful but now I seem almost in the presence of death. But though it is very hard for us all and especially for myself I feel that it is best for her and for us too.

Your sincere friend
W^m R Smith

Do not think I should not have written so to you. You do not know how great a loss it will be to me. And I wished to tell you what I have myself seen in her, that there is but one thing that can give composure & happiness even in death.

P. S. Mary Jane was very thankful for the oranges. She finds them very refreshing now when she is unable to take a drink. We could not have got them here. She cannot take the jelly but Mamma sends her thanks for it.

1864-05-12 from Keig to Archibald McDonald¹²

My Dear Archie

I write a line or two, that M^{rs} M^cDonald may know how Jane is keeping. She slept well last night but is very much weaker to-day and has scarcely tasted any thing all day. Her breathing has been rather easier but she feels an increasing weariness which tries her much. She has never however given way in the least to impatience and is very happy in the prospect of death, delighting much to think of heaven and the prospect of soon meeting us all there. She is now too weak to speak much but almost every word she utters is full of faith, hope & love.

Your sincere friend
W^m Robertson Smith

P. S. Many thanks for the oranges which arrived with D^r Williamson yesterday morning. He did not trouble her with an examination which could only have fatigued her without doing any good.

W R Smith

¹² CUL, MS Add. 7449, C51.

1865–07–07

from Keig to Archibald McDonald¹³

My Dear Archibald,

I hope you have received, within the last day or two, the body of a bat which I rescued from the hands of Lucy¹⁴ and delivered to Willie McDonald to send to you. It was to have been sent by Papa on Monday, had he not been uncertain whether he would have time to call at Alford Place. I think it is a very good specimen though not of large size. I have made lately one or two Zoological observations, but none of importance. You will perhaps be surprised to hear that till this spring I have never seen the skylark within the bounds of the Vale of Alford. This spring however I observed a pair in a field not far from this, which denotes an increase of our Fauna.

By-the-bye the squirrel also which was unknown two or three years ago is now very common in our woods. Yesterday I watched one for a long time very near the house. Its efforts to get out of sight without coming off the trees were very amusing. After proceeding for about a hundred yards, it reached a point where the trees were so far apart as to prevent its further progress, and was obliged to retrace its whole course. It then took another direction but was after all obliged to take the ground for a few feet. The descent and re-ascent were performed with astounding agility; in fact I think it ran much faster up the tree trunk than on the ground. This manoeuvre enabled it to join its mate in a bushy tree, which after some time they left together for another expedition in mid-air. This is not a particularly interesting subject for a letter, but I can assure you the sight of it was a very pretty and amusing one.

Now is the season, I think, for learning about birds. Last night, at one time, in one plot of our garden, I counted the following species at least – Sparrow, Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Tomtit, Yellow-hammer, Wren, and I think one or two others whose names I do not remember. I saw today a pair of very pretty birds – I suppose Whin-chats, which I do not remember to have seen before, at least, lately.

Have you seen or heard of the “*Ootheca Wolleyana*” an illustrated catalogue of what the Saturday Review (which reviews the work) believes to be “by far the largest and most complete series of the eggs of European birds in existence”? This collection was formed by a Mr Wolley who died in 1859. The Accipitres only are as yet published. The review is a rather interesting

¹³ CUL, MS Add. 7476 M1 (typescript copy).

¹⁴ Lucy Smith (1859–1922), the second youngest child and youngest daughter of William Pirie Smith and his wife.

one but I suppose you will either see the book or at least some notice of it. I am much surprised at having written a whole sheet of Zoology (such as it is); and having got so far I may add, that the deer have already, though the season has not been a dry one, found their way from the hill to the fields near us. I myself have not seen any, but some of the others have.

Have you got any more shells lately? I have half a mind to set about collecting when I go to Macduff, but I do not know how I could find the names. I hope you find the work at the office agreeable. George Anderson apparently likes it very well. I had a letter from him lately written in the office, a fact which indicates no great press of labour. I have not yet got the gold medal but expect it soon, as it is in the hands of the engraver.¹⁵ How is Henderson keeping? Is he working hard? With kind regards to Mrs McDonald and Mrs Yeats I am

Yours sincerely
Wm R Smith

1865–10–19 from Glasgow to his brother George¹⁶

My Dear George¹⁷

I propose to write you a long letter & tell you about the competition.¹⁸ Not the questions which I don't care to think about just now but about the examiners & candidates and so on.

We were supplied with pens paper & everything we needed at the office. The three Mathematical candidates sat at one table the classical (six in number I think) at the other & the Metaphysicians (who were at first three

15 At the end of his course of studies at Aberdeen University, Smith was prevented by illness from attempting any of the examinations for prizes and honours, but “was unanimously recommended for the Town Council Gold Medal, the only honour which could be given without competition, and which is annually conferred upon the best student of his class, taking all the curriculum into account” (*LWRS* 57–58).

16 University of Aberdeen, The Sir Duncan Rice Library, Special Collections, Letters of William Robertson Smith (henceforth ASDRL), MS 3674/1/2/2/1.

17 George Michie Smith (1848–66), the third child and second son of William Pirie Smith and his wife.

18 The competition for the Ferguson Scholarship, which was annually awarded to alumni of the Scottish universities for Classics, Philosophy and Mathematics. Smith had decided to compete for the Mathematical Ferguson Scholarship, although one of his professors had advised him to try his fortune in Philosophy (*LWRS* 56–59).

or four in number but ultimately I think fell to two) at a third. As we got lunch in the office (gratis) during an hour's interval each day we got tolerably well acquainted. Most of the fellows were a good deal older than I am. One f. Edinburgh who however gave in & left without trying the last paper, was a nice fellow & I got quite friendly with him. He did not look very old; but Macpherson must be several years older than I am. He was not disposed to be very friendly.

In classics it seems to be the general opinion that the struggle lies between Minto & Brown from Edinburgh. Brown seems a nice, hearty sort of fellow & Minto & he were on the best terms. They seem to be very nearly equal & both have done well. In philosophy the struggle is between Glasgow & Edinburgh. I did not get acquainted with the Edinburgh man, but the Glasgow competitor (who is pretty old, with a huge beard) I was on good terms with. From a specimen he gave of the way in which he answered a question in which his own opinion was asked as to a doctrine I fancy he is clever & likely to prove successful.

As to the examiners I have little to say as I scarcely noticed any of them but Tait.¹⁹ He is not at all such a man as I expected to see being stout & rather heavy looking, with fair hair & a thick moustache. He seemed rather good natured. The result it is supposed will be known on Monday when letters will be sent off to all of us. But Tait told me that his report would be in the hand of the trustees on Friday so I am to call at the office on Saturday before starting for Edinburgh though I am not sure that they will tell me who has got the Scholarship.

The room we were examined in, was a very comfortable one & well furnished. It contained a very good library & a portrait (life size), bust & photograph of Ferguson. This forenoon I went out a walk with Minto & first proceeded to the Free Church College which has a very lofty tower. This we ascended & from the top got a splendid view. Parts of seven counties I think are seen from it. The parts of these that lay to the south of Glasgow we could not see for mist & indeed most of the town was invisible from this cause & from the smoke. But northwards the prospect was very extensive & beautiful. We then proceeded to a picture gallery which is open gratis. A number of the pictures are only copies from great masters but a good many are originals. After this we went to the Cathedral which Minto had not been in and which I was not sorry to revisit. Since I wrote last I have also been in the Exchange

¹⁹ Peter Guthrie Tait (1831–1901), mathematical physicist and pioneer in thermodynamics, Professor of Natural Philosophy at Edinburgh University from 1860.

a fine building in the Greek style with numerous Corinthian pillars. Within are posted up all the most recent telegrams. This puts me in mind to ask you if you have heard yet of Palmerston's death which took place yesterday.

Tell Papa that we intend to go to Edinburgh by the 10.30 A. M. Express which I think was the train that was thought best when we were at Keig. I daresay I should have mentioned that, though Tuesday was a very stormy day, Wednesday & to-day have been peculiarly fine and sunny. I hope you have had as good weather at Keig. This is to be enclosed in an Envelope addressed to Alice²⁰ as it is supposed that this will gratify her. With kind love to all I am

Your affectionate brother
W^m Robertson Smith

1866–01

from Aberdeen to his father²¹

My Dear Papa

I have at length received notice that the Senatus has sanctioned my appointment to the Scholarship. I received directions at the same time to apply to Hunter for information as to time of payment &c.; but, as I have been obliged to keep in the house for the last day or two, on account of a boil on my cheek which I am not willing to expose to the cold air, I have not yet gone to Hunter. On Friday night we got on very well at Henderson's; but were unable to get away so soon as we would have wished. There were two other students there – one of them a magistrand, Duncan M^cGregor, who is one of the best students in George's class. I did not think him very pleasant, tho' no doubt he is clever. Please send in, in the box, Wayland's Moral Sciences, and also my small Catullus, Tibullus &c which is needed for some references in George's Virgil. I have also to state the somewhat alarming fact that our butter is nearly done; in fact will not last another week. What course shall we take with regard to it?

I have finished Mill now.²² I think that the book may be divided into two parts of very different Value. The first part contains criticisms on some of Hamilton's leading doctrines, and being preceded by no examination of the

²⁰ Alice Smith (1858–1943), the second youngest daughter of William Pirie Smith and his wife.

²¹ ASDRL, MS 3674/1/2/2/2.

²² The reference is to John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philos-*