

BERNHARD MAIER

# William Robertson Smith

*Forschungen  
zum Alten Testament*

67

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**Mohr Siebeck**

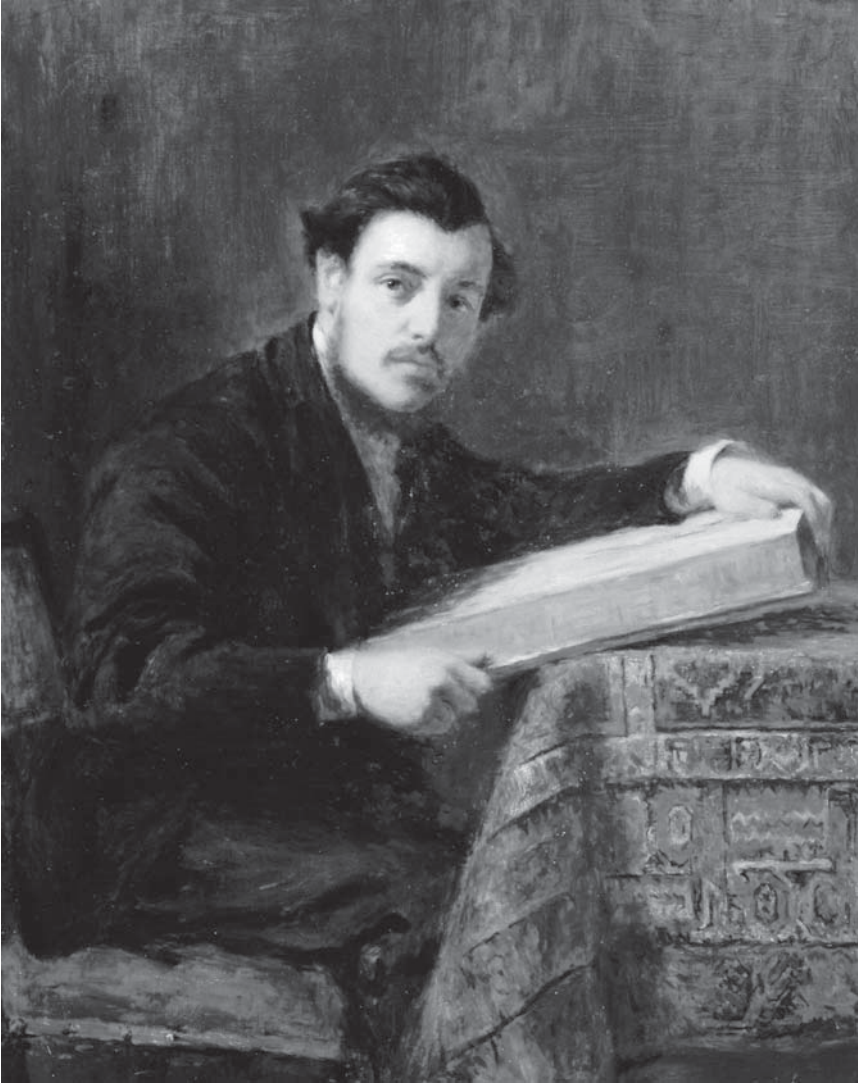
# Forschungen zum Alten Testament

Edited by

Bernd Janowski (Tübingen) · Mark S. Smith (New York)  
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67





William Robertson Smith in 1876

Bernhard Maier

# William Robertson Smith

His Life, his Work and his Times

Mohr Siebeck

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e-ISBN PDF 978-3-16-151108-0

ISBN 978-3-16-149995-1

ISSN 0940-4155 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

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The book was typeset and printed by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Otterweier.

Printed in Germany.

## Acknowledgements

In writing this biography, I have experienced the help of many people to whom I should like to express my heartfelt thanks. Pride of place must be given to Mrs. Astrid Hess and Dr Gordon K. Booth, without whose support and encouragement there would have been a very different kind of book or perhaps none at all. Mrs. Hess, a great-grandniece of William Robertson Smith, readily made available her extensive collection of biographical documents, generously supplied many letters and pictures which are now in family possession, and was always ready to help out with information on her family's history. For enlightening discussions, valuable advice and stimulating suggestions I have to thank Dr Booth, whose doctoral thesis and essays on William Robertson Smith proved to be mines of factual information and perceptive analysis. Moreover, Dr Booth most generously read the whole of the book in manuscript form, discussing not only points of style and usage, but also of factual contents and interpretation. Needless to say, I alone am responsible for any shortcomings that remain.

For the permission to quote from unpublished material in their possession, I have to thank Aberdeen University Library; Aberdeen City Archives; Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin; Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn; the Syndics of Cambridge University Library; Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt am Main; Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen; Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden and Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen. I also wish to express my thanks to Professor Rudolf Smend, who first established contact with the publishing house of Mohr Siebeck, to Dr Henning Ziebritzki under whose guidance the project took shape, and to the editors of FAT for their consent to publish the book in this series. In 2004–2006, twenty months of living and teaching in Aberdeen gave me the opportunity to experience all four seasons on the northeast coast of Scotland (often in one single day), enjoy the matter-of-fact cordiality of the Aberdonians, take two long walks in the Vale of Alford, and – last but not least – look from the outside and at a distance at my own culture. For this, too, I am grateful.

The life described in this book ended abruptly and by modern standards prematurely before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, many of the questions which William Robertson Smith investigated have continued – and no

doubt will continue – to fascinate, intrigue and challenge us. As he used to say: המאמין לא יהיש.<sup>1</sup>

Tübingen, 31 March 2009

Bernhard Maier

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<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 185.

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## Introduction

In the history of our modern understanding of 'religion', the importance of the second half of the nineteenth century can hardly be overestimated. The demand for an unprejudiced study of the Bible and a historical view of Christianity, the encounter with numerous hitherto unknown ethnic religions, exciting archaeological discoveries of ancient monuments and inscriptions, the establishment of new academic disciplines such as comparative philology and psychology, changes in our perception of man and his environment due to new findings in biology and physics, the rise of positivism, scepticism and agnosticism in an age of growing secularisation, a marked increase in religious pluralism due to migration, changes in mentality and life-styles due to massive urbanisation, and last but not least the large-scale popularisation of scientific discoveries and theories in the wake of educational changes and new media of communication – all these factors contributed to revolutionising traditional notions of religion.

A key figure of that truly revolutionary age is the Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis, editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Professor of Arabic and pioneer in comparative religious studies, William Robertson Smith (1846–1894). Brought up in a country manse in the northeast of Scotland, the highly talented son of a Free Church minister studied in both Scotland and Germany and came to be known as the congenial and valued friend of many leading scholars in both countries. For a while assistant professor in the laboratory of the Edinburgh physicist Peter Guthrie Tait, Smith declined a career in the natural sciences in order to take up theology as his profession. Having come into conflict with his church on account of his strictly historical view of the Bible, he was deprived of his chair of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College, Aberdeen, and became successively co-editor and editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, University Librarian and finally Professor of Arabic in Cambridge. By a novel combination of theological, historical, comparative and social anthropological approaches, Smith altered our understanding of religion profoundly. But his insights and theories were not just a major contribution to scholarly discussions of his time. Due to the reception of his work by scholars as diverse as James George Frazer, Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud, they are of lasting and pervasive influence to this day.

The first biography of William Robertson Smith was published in 1912 by John Sutherland Black and George William Chrystal.<sup>1</sup> According to the preface, the preparations for it had started almost immediately after Smith's death.<sup>2</sup> However, a letter from Smith's sister Lucy to her elder sister Alice shows that as late as 1908, the first three chapters had not yet reached their final shape.<sup>3</sup> As J. S. Black was later to explain in the preface, the project originally conceived in 1894 had first been 'postponed to the execution of another literary design' – this refers to the four-volume *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, published in 1899–1903 by J. S. Black and T. K. Cheyne – and was then further delayed 'owing to defect of health and leisure.'<sup>4</sup> By the beginning of 1908, the first three chapters were evidently being written up by George William Chrystal (1880–1944), the eldest son of Smith's friend George Chrystal (1851–1911), Professor of Mathematics at the University of Edinburgh. When the book finally came to be published in 1912, the names of the authors were given as 'John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal' on the frontispiece, but abbreviated as 'J. S. Black and G. W. Chrystal' on the spine and as 'J. S. B.' and 'G. W. Ch.' on p. vi at the end of the preface, dated 20 April 1912. This probably means that around 1908, George William Chrystal had taken over from his father, whose health had been failing from about that time and who had died on 3 November 1911. This is suggested not least by the authors' references to Smith as 'their friend' and 'their common friend' (on p. v and p. 576), expressions which do not make good sense in the case of George William Chrystal (who was only fourteen years old at the time of Smith's death), but seem natural in the case of his father who like J. S. Black had known Smith for more than 20 years.<sup>5</sup>

*The Life of William Robertson Smith*, for many years the only comprehensive biography of its protagonist, was based on personal acquaintance on the part of the authors and a host of unpublished sources, some of which appear to be no longer extant, presumably because they were returned to their respective owners after the conclusion of the project. It provides us with a fresh and vivid picture of Smith's personality, but clearly shows its date both by its

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<sup>1</sup> BLACK and CHRYSAL 1912. For contemporary reviews, see J. M. Powis Smith in *The American Journal of Theology* 17,1 (January 1913), 107–9, and Stanley A. Cook in *The Hibbert Journal* 11 (1912/13), 211–17.

<sup>2</sup> This is confirmed by a letter, dated 11 June 1894, from Smith's fellow-student William Alexander Gray to one of Smith's sisters (CUL 7476 M 9).

<sup>3</sup> Letter dated 10 January 1908 (FP).

<sup>4</sup> BLACK and CHRYSAL 1912, v.

<sup>5</sup> This may be inferred from a letter dated 7 November 1874 (CUL 7449 D 186), in which Ludwig Diestel informs Smith that 'a certain Mr. Chrystal from Cambridge' had come to Tübingen, provided with a letter of recommendation written by Smith and addressed to Diestel. In August 1879, George Chrystal mentions his 'personal intercourse with Professor Smith for a good many years back' (*Testimonials* 1879, 13).

firm adherence to the biographical conventions of the times and by its rather idiosyncratic focus on the heresy trial as the single most important event. Moreover, it was written rather too early to provide us with a detached account of Smith's life in its historical context and a detailed examination of the far-reaching influence of his work. Over the past decades, both the historical context of Smith's life and the widely ramifying influence of his work have been the subject of intensive research, and there are now many detailed and comprehensive studies on the political, social, economic and religious history of the Victorian period, the development of scholarship, education and mentality, and the influence of Smith's work on social anthropology, sociology, comparative religious studies and theology. Last but not least, there is the recent discovery of autobiographical memoirs by Smith's father and by one of his younger sisters which shed fresh light on his upbringing and early development.

In this new biography, I have tried to take full advantage of the progress of research and yet document the various stages of Smith's life in a way which would not duplicate the efforts of Black and Chrystal. While several key sources obviously could not be bypassed and thus will be found in both books, care has been taken to offer not only fresh interpretations, but also fresh evidence, so that whoever takes up *The Life of William Robertson Smith* after reading my own book will still find much of interest in the older work. A key source for my biography has been Smith's correspondence with his Continental friends, most notably Carl Schaarschmidt, Albrecht Ritschl, Max Nöther, Felix Klein, Paul de Lagarde, Ludwig Diestel, Eberhard Nestle, Wilhelm Spitta, Abraham Kuenen, Theodor Nöldeke, Julius Wellhausen, Albert Socin and Michael Jan de Goeje. In addition, I have used letters from T. Nöldeke to William Wright and M.J. de Goeje, from J. Wellhausen to A. Socin and from Emily Wright to T. Nöldeke and M.J. de Goeje. In the main text, letters which are in another language than English are given in a literal English translation, the occasional Greek, Arabic and Hebrew word or phrase being transliterated and supplied with a translation in square brackets to facilitate both reading and comprehension. In the footnotes, letters in other languages than English are given as they appear in the original, including inconsistencies of spelling (e.g. in the use of  $\beta$  for ss). However, words which are underlined in the handwritten original are given in italics both in the main text and in the notes.

## I. At the foot of Cairn William

In the evening of 3 April 1894, the mortal remains of William Robertson Smith arrived in Aberdeen by train from Cambridge.<sup>1</sup> From the main railway station in the city centre they were taken to the Queen's Cross Free Church, where at eight in the following morning numerous people gathered to attend a memorial service. Friends, colleagues, students, admirers, members of the Presbytery of Alford, citizens of Aberdeen, and a delegation of the University Senate headed by the Principal, Sir William Geddes, had come to honour the deceased scholar. Each of the two ministers who conducted the service had been a personal friend of Robertson Smith. James Smith Candlish, Professor of Systematic Theology in the Free Church College, Glasgow, had defended his colleague against the heresy charges which in 1876–81 had been raised by the conservative wing of the Free Church of Scotland.<sup>2</sup> George Adam Smith, once minister of the Queen's Cross Free Church and from 1892 Professor of Old Testament Language, Literature, and Theology in the Free Church College, Glasgow, had temporarily replaced Robertson Smith when in 1881 he was finally deprived of his chair.<sup>3</sup> After the service, the congregation accompanied the coffin to the railway station, where many mourners joined a special funeral train which took them out of the city to the little railway station of Whitehouse at the foot of Cairn William in the Vale of Alford. From there, the congregation proceeded to the Free Church of Keig, about a mile north of Whitehouse. There the coffin was drawn from the hearse and carried into the little church, where 47 years before William Robertson Smith had been baptized. At that time his father, William Pirie Smith, had been minister of the newly formed Free Church parish of Keig and Tough, an office which he had held for 35 years. The Rev. H.H. Currie, for some years Pirie Smith's colleague and now his successor, conducted the service. After the benediction, the coffin was again lifted and taken to the parish churchyard some two miles north of

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<sup>1</sup> For what follows, cf. the anonymous accounts of the funeral in *The Evening Gazette* (4 April 1894), *The Aberdeen Free Press* (5 April 1894), *The Scotsman* (5 April 1894) and *The British Weekly* (12 April 1894), the last of which is partly reproduced in BLACK and CHRYS-TAL 1912, 557–59.

<sup>2</sup> See EWING 1914, I, 51.

<sup>3</sup> See EWING 1914, I, 59 and SMITH 1943, 19.

the Free Church on the far side of the River Don. Here, beside the grave of his father, his sisters Mary Jane and Eliza, and his brothers George and Herbert, William Robertson Smith was finally laid to rest, ‘without word spoken, as the Scottish custom is, on the hillside above his birthplace.’<sup>4</sup>

In the obituaries which were published over the following weeks and months there are many expressions of admiration for the multifarious talents and intellectual attainments of Robertson Smith. ‘We hazard very little in saying that Professor Smith, in the depth and range of his knowledge, had no equal among living men’, was the verdict of an anonymous obituary in the *British Weekly*.<sup>5</sup> ‘For hours, for a long day even, he could talk without weariness or dullness on subject after subject to his company’s heart’s content, and never be commonplace, never fail to stimulate and instruct’, claimed the author of another anonymous obituary in the journal *The Bookman*.<sup>6</sup> ‘So multifarious were his attainments, so many-sided his culture, so profound, and, at the same time, so encyclopaedic his learning, that few among us are in a position to do more than dimly realize the magnitude of the loss which we have sustained’, stated Smith’s Cambridge colleague Edward Granville Browne (1862–1926).<sup>7</sup> ‘But important as are his published works’, noted a former student, ‘there was never a scholar of whom it was more true that he himself was greater than the works he gave to the world. I think it was perhaps in attending his lectures that one best learned to appreciate his mental powers.’<sup>8</sup> As the historian and politician James Bryce (1838–1922) pointed out:<sup>9</sup>

His mathematical talents were remarkable, and during two sessions he taught with conspicuous success the class of Natural Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh as assistant professor. He had a competent acquaintance with not a few other practical arts, including navigation, and once, when the compasses of the vessel on which he was sailing in the Red Sea got out of order, he proved to be the person on board most competent to set them right.

Given his intellectual brilliance and the sheer breadth and depth of his knowledge, at least one contemporary observer found Smith’s personal religious convictions all the more embarrassing:<sup>10</sup>

How came he, after realising that not only Biblical literature as a whole, but nearly every ostensibly homogeneous section, is a structure of various and divergent hands, plans, times, ideals – how came he still to think that these composites are products

<sup>4</sup> BLACK and CHRYSAL 1912, 559.

<sup>5</sup> ANON. 1894b.

<sup>6</sup> ANON. 1894f.

<sup>7</sup> BROWNE 1894, 594.

<sup>8</sup> MCLEAN 1894, 471.

<sup>9</sup> BRYCE 1903, 322.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from BLACK and CHRYSAL, 572.

of ‘revelation’ and ‘inspiration’ in a sense in which no other or extra-Christian literature is?

To answer this question, we may do well to recall the comment of another contemporary observer who recorded his impression of Smith in a short newspaper article published 35 years later:<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the most attractive traits in his little, alert figure and his unique personality were his love of the country manse where he was born, and of those who lived there and their love for him – his restless industry and his great courage.

### 1. *A country manse*

The roughly triangular Vale of Alford, with the town of Alford in the west and the two villages of Whitehouse in the south-east and Keig in the north-east, lies halfway between the mountainous west and the more lowlying east of Aberdeenshire in the northeast of Scotland. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the whole area was still extremely rural. Of some 123.000 people living in Aberdeenshire, some 27.000 were living in the capital Aberdeen itself and most of the rest in tiny villages with a population of less than 100 inhabitants.<sup>12</sup>

Most of the people living on the sea-coast dwelt in fishing villages which had been built on the rocky parts of the shore.<sup>13</sup> At that time, fishing was an occupation for the whole family, some six or seven men manning a boat and their wives and children helping with the necessary preparations as well as with processing and selling the catch. Many other people were employed in providing boats, nets, necessary utensils and the means of transport. Traditionally, the fishing industry had been based on white fish such as haddock, cod and ling, but in the course of the 19th century the growth of herring fishing led to the expansion of minor seaports such as Peterhead and Fraserburgh, whose populations grew steadily in the wake of this development. At about the same time, Aberdeen experienced an unprecedented rise in the building of clippers, fast sailing vessels which were employed in the trade with India and China from about 1840 until the introduction of long distance steam navigation and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

In the life of William Robertson Smith, the sea was present in many ways almost from the beginning. From the top of Cairn William at the back of the manse, one could see the North Sea, faintly visible in clear weather as a distant blue ribbon bordering the eastern horizon. From Aberdeen, his fa-

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<sup>11</sup> HENDERSON 1929, 11.

<sup>12</sup> WOOD 1985, 4.

<sup>13</sup> See SMITH and STEVENSON 1989, 26–49.

ther's mother and sister occasionally sent the family smoked haddock and, in the bay at Stonehaven some 15 miles south of Aberdeen, the Smith children once received instruction in the art of diving in return for tuition in Greek grammar given at the manse of Keig. Occasionally, the family spent a month of their summer holidays in one of the coastal villages, and during a stay on the isle of Bute in the spring and summer of 1868, a retired naval officer taught Smith how to sail a boat.<sup>14</sup> In an early letter to his life-long friend, Archibald MacDonald, Smith asks about his friend's collection of shells, adding that he has 'half a mind to set about collecting' himself.<sup>15</sup> One room in the manse was called 'the captain's room', as it was reserved for the occasional visits of a master mariner who was always keen to see Smith's parents when he was ashore and would present his landlubber friends with exotic gifts from distant countries.<sup>16</sup> Much later, when Smith had been appointed editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, he spent more than a week in re-writing the article on 'Navigation' which he had deemed to be insufficient.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the population of the coastal towns and villages, most of the people living further inland were employed in agriculture.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the 18th century, this was done with very simple means and under unfavourable natural conditions, so that many tracts of land remained uncultivated and the whole area was only sparsely populated. However, from around 1800 onwards, many landowners strove to improve the economical situation by means of various innovations such as land reclamation by trenching, draining and the removal of stones, the redistribution of cultivated fields, the foundation of new settlements, soil improvement by manure, the extension of leases and the use of more modern agricultural implements. The main crops were oats, barley and potatoes, only rarely wheat. Turnips became increasingly important for the feeding of animals during winter and played a major part in the rapid extension of cattle breeding.

In many quarters, the improvement of living conditions was received as something of a mixed blessing, for it frequently implied the demise of time-honoured traditions and the enforcement of a new mobility in both spatial and psychological terms. The social, economic and cultural changes which this involved were chronicled by the Aberdeen journalist, newspaper editor and writer William Alexander (1826–1894). His celebrated novel *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk* is still regarded as a classic work of realistic Scottish lit-

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<sup>14</sup> See BLACK and CRYSTAL 1912, 25 and 100; Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 5, 13, 33 and 52.

<sup>15</sup> Letter dated 7 July 1865 (CUL 7476 M 1).

<sup>16</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 6–7.

<sup>17</sup> SHIEL 1995, 84.

<sup>18</sup> See CARTER 2003.



erature, not least because of his skilful use of the local Aberdeenshire dialect known as the ‘Doric.’<sup>19</sup> This was also the language spoken informally at the manse of Keig, and Smith to the end of his days ‘spoke with a strong Scottish accent which years of residence in England modified but little.’<sup>20</sup>

An important factor in the social and economic development of North-East Scotland was the expansion of road networks and communication links. Following the opening of the first turnpike road from Aberdeen to Drum in 1798, Aberdeenshire boasted 300 miles of turnpike roads in 1811 and 450 miles around 1850. As early as 1807, a canal from Aberdeen to Port Elphinstone near Inverurie was opened in order to link the agricultural and textile producers of the hinterland to the city and its harbour. Regular steamship services from Aberdeen to London were introduced in 1827, and by the 1840s the number of stagecoach services out of Aberdeen had increased to about 20, including two postal services each day to Edinburgh.<sup>21</sup> In 1850, the Aberdeen Railway first linked the city to the south. This was followed in 1854 by the opening of the Great North of Scotland Railway, running initially from Kittybrewster to Huntly. It was gradually extended as far as Inverness, a branch line to Whitehouse and Alford being opened in 1858.

In many ways, the personality of Robertson Smith with its sanguinity and cheerful optimism appears to have been very much in line with that confident belief in progress and improvement which is now regarded as a hallmark of the period in which he lived. As his mother recalled:<sup>22</sup>

When between 2 & 3 years of age, a kind friend Dr M. who resided in the neighbouring parish brought his waggonette to take the whole family to spend a day at his house. It was the first time W. had been fairly out of the wood, & when he saw the beautiful vale encircled with hills, many of them cultivated to the top, others covered with heather or patches of wood, he burst out in ecstasy with “O! What a beautiful world.”

The slopes of Cairn William rising immediately behind the manse garden served as an extended playground for the children as they grew older. In her old age, Alice Smith Thiele – who had moved to Germany in 1883 – still recalled how on one of these excursions, running down through the knee-deep heather, they managed to catch a young hare.<sup>23</sup> In later years, too, Smith was known to be fond of mountains and hiking. ‘He liked the absolutely bare mountains’, recalled J. G. Frazer, ‘with nothing on them but the grass and the heather, better than wooded mountains, which I was then in-

<sup>19</sup> See DONALDSON 1986.

<sup>20</sup> See BLACK and CHRYSTAL 1912, 562, and cf. ANON. 1894c, 446.

<sup>21</sup> FRASER and LEE 2000, 38 and 78.

<sup>22</sup> Biographical sketch by Jane Smith (AUL MS 3674), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 5.

clined to prefer.<sup>24</sup> Ben Nevis, the Brocken, the Hohe Meissner, the Similaun, Mount Vesuvius and Mount Hermon are only some of the mountains which Smith is known to have climbed.<sup>25</sup> Many decades later, the daughter of his friend J. F. White still recalled how Smith and his art-collecting friend John Irvine Smith had once gone to the Swiss Alps in order to search for a particular motif in one of Turner's drawings.<sup>26</sup> Having first gone abroad as a twenty-year old student, Smith remained a passionate traveller for the rest of his life – in marked contrast to scholars such as J. G. Frazer or Theodor Nöldeke, who decidedly preferred the quiet of their study to the bustle and inconvenience of the outside world.

Smith's parents had moved from Aberdeen into the Vale of Alford soon after the great Disruption of 1843, when the Evangelical party led by Thomas Chalmers had left the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church of Scotland.<sup>27</sup> As this was regarded by its leaders as the true and rightful Presbyterian Church, the separation was followed all over the country by the foundation of new church buildings and the creation of new ecclesiastical structures, which in many cases duplicated those of the Established Church but according to the plans of their founders were ultimately meant to replace them. The Vale of Alford was – in contrast to the city of Aberdeen – a stronghold of the Established Church. Nevertheless, the Free Church immediately set about organising a Free Presbytery with several small parishes counting some 100–300 members.<sup>28</sup> One of these was the Parish of Keig und Tough, whose members chose as their minister the thirty-four year old schoolmaster William Pirie Smith of Aberdeen. After prolonged negotiations he gave up his comfortable post of head teacher at the West End Academy in Aberdeen, and soon after his ordination on 5 November 1845, the new minister, his wife and little daughter moved to Keig.<sup>29</sup>

In many places across Scotland, local landowners had refused to grant sites to the Free Church for the building of new churches and manses. This was also the case at Keig, so that during the first few months all services had to be held in a shed specifically built for that purpose at Keig or in a barn in the neighbouring village of Tough. During that period, the family lived at first with some members of the newly founded congregation, and then at New Farm, a small house about a mile south of the village of Keig. Here, during a Sunday service on 8 November 1846, William Robertson was born as the

<sup>24</sup> Letter to J. F. White dated 15 December 1897 (ACKERMAN 2005, 102–10).

<sup>25</sup> See SMITH 1879j, BLACK and CHRYSAL 1912, 111, 153 and 311, WHITE 1899, 196 and two letters of Smith (CUL 7449 A 22 and C 157a).

<sup>26</sup> MACDONELL 1933.

<sup>27</sup> See below pp. 30–37.

<sup>28</sup> See EWING 1914, II, 182–3.

<sup>29</sup> See BLACK and CHRYSAL 1912, 6–9, T. M. Lindsay in CUL 7476 M 2, 4–5 and Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 16.

second child and first son of the couple. Soon after his birth, the family moved to a spacious new manse, which was built close by the road from Keig to Whitehouse after the local landowner had given up his initial resistance. In this manse, the family continued to live for thirty-five years. There, the children of the family grew up, and to it William Robertson Smith continued to return at regular intervals, long after he had been appointed Professor at the Free Church College, Aberdeen. In 1933, his sister Alice recalled the house and its surroundings in a wistful description intended for her children and grandchildren:<sup>30</sup>

The small, plain manse was set in green surroundings, all by itself in the middle of the big garden. No other house was visible from there. As a matter of fact, the nearest neighbour, a very small tenant farmer, could be reached within ten or twelve minutes. The road ran close by the front of the property, separated from the garden only by a grass verge and a little drystone wall which was covered by cotoneaster and crowned by a wooden fence. On the opposite side of the road, there were fields and small patches of forest. Beside the garden, and separated from it only by a light fence abutting on lush blackcurrant bushes, stood the little church in the middle of a lawn. Behind the church, farther back, stood the outbuildings: a horse stable for those members of the congregation who used to drive to the service, a henhouse, a cowshed, and a barn for the straw. The whole estate was enclosed on three sides by a fairly high beech hedge, and at regular intervals there were slender beeches growing out of the hedge. It was a most pretty enclosure, and when in May the hedge was resplendent in the most tender lime-green and in the garden the fruit trees and the lilac were in blossom, I remember how in the mornings I would look down from the window of our children's room and how my heart would swell with joy: how beautiful indeed was the world and our home!

What kind of people were the minister and his wife, who had made this rural manse far from the bustle of their native city of Aberdeen into their

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<sup>30</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 3–4: 'Das kleine, einfache Pfarrhaus lag mitten im Grün, im großen Garten, ganz für sich, kein anderes Haus konnte man von dort erblicken. In Wirklichkeit war der nächste Nachbar, ein ganz kleiner Bauer auf gepachtetem Land, in 10 bis 12 Minuten zu erreichen. Der Fahrweg führte dicht an der Vorderseite des Grundstücks vorbei, nur durch einen Garten und eine rohe Steinmauer, an der der Cotoneaster herunterhing, mit einem Holzzaun oben drauf, vom Garten getrennt. Auf der entgegenliegenden Seite des Weges lagen Felder und kleine Waldbestände. Neben dem Garten und von ihm nur durch einen leichten Zaun, an dem die schwarzen Johannisbeeren üppig wuchsen, getrennt, stand die kleine Kirche im grünen Rasen. Hinter der Kirche weiter zurück standen die Nebengebäude, ein Pferdestall für die Gemeindeglieder, die zum Gottesdienst gefahren kamen, ein Hühnerhaus, Kuhstall und Scheune für das Stroh. Das ganze Grundstück war auf 3 Seiten von einer ziemlich hohen Buchenhecke eingeschlossen und in regelmäßigen Abständen strebten aus der Hecke schlanke Buchen in die Höhe. Es war eine wunderschöne Umzäunung, und wenn im Mai die Hecke im zartesten Frühjahrsgrün prangte und im Garten die Obstbäume und der Flieder blühten, weiß ich noch, wie ich morgens von unserem Kinderstubenfenster herunterschaute und wie mein Herz vor Wonne schwoll, wie schön war doch die Welt und unser Heim!'

home? And who were the children who grew up in this secluded spot in the Vale of the Don, at the foot of Cairn William?

## 2. *Parents and siblings*

Only four years after he had died, an anonymous contemporary remarked that Smith's father was<sup>31</sup>

in many respects a most remarkable man. Many remember his picturesque figure as he was wont to appear in Church Courts. The velvet skull-cap, the flowing locks, the neat attire and the graceful movements of the man, features expressive and animated, and a mode of speech singularly suggestive of restrained power, made up a person of unique attraction. He was a man of many gifts, though these were largely unknown to the world. An accomplished scholar, a trained and skilful teacher, a theologian widely read, a preacher of singular penetration and power, he yet saw it his duty to devote himself altogether to the work of his congregation and the training of his family.

Recalling his first impression of Pirie Smith during a visit to the manse of Keig while he was still a student, Thomas Martin Lindsay noted:<sup>32</sup>

A finely-cut face, not unlike the portraits of Erasmus, but with eyes that showed more warmth and power of self-sacrifice, thin white hair, the body bent forward, hands resting on the elbows of the arm-chair in which he sat, hasty uprising, kindly words of welcome and kindlier smile – so much memory still keeps of the first sight I had of Dr. Smith in the Free Church Manse of Keig when, a college friend of his son's I entered it to spend a few days under its roof.

'It was said that father looked like Erasmus', confirms his daughter Alice, adding that<sup>33</sup>

his head had made on a famous painter of portraits such an impression that he asked for permission to portray him. This he did in the manner of the old Flemish painters, namely three portraits side by side on the same canvas: one from the front, one in profile, and one in half-profile. Every portrait bore a striking resemblance, and yet each of them had a quite different expression.

William Pirie Smith was born in Aberdeen on 14 April 1811, the second of three children of the ropemaker Gilbert Smith. Around 1817 – perhaps due to the economic difficulties after the end of the Napoleonic Wars – his father

<sup>31</sup> ANON. 1894a, 7.

<sup>32</sup> CUL 7476 M 2, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 11–12: 'Es hieß, daß Vater Erasmus ähnlich sah, und sein Kopf hatte auf einen berühmten Portraitmaler solchen Eindruck gemacht, daß er bat ihn malen zu dürfen und zwar tat er es nach altflämischer Art, dreimal neben einander auf derselben Leinwand, von vorn, im Profil und halb abgewandt. Jedes Portrait war treffend ähnlich und doch brachte jedes einen ganz anderen Ausdruck.'

went bankrupt and fled from his creditors to America, leaving his family behind. His mother then opened a small shop, and from this and some home work managed to eke out a modest living for herself, her eldest daughter Martha and her two sons. The younger son, George, was drowned in a bathing accident while he was still a child. The other two children grew up with their mother, without a word coming from their father. As Martha reluctantly admitted to her niece Alice long after these events, her mother had indeed received at least one letter from America, in which Gilbert Smith asked her and the children to join him.<sup>34</sup> This, however, the mother refused. The memory of Gilbert Smith faded, and his name was not passed on in the family of his only surviving son. Being a staunch Calvinist, the single mother endeavoured to provide a basic Christian education for her children, saying prayers in the morning and in the evening every day, keeping a strict Sunday rest, and inculcating regular attendance at Church service. As Pirie Smith recalled much later, it must have been at the age of four that he learnt to read with the help of the Bible.<sup>35</sup> At the age of thirteen, he left school and worked as an assistant first at a druggist's and then at a grocer's, but in the autumn of 1825 he finally started a five-year apprenticeship as a woodturner, a trade in which he worked as a journeyman until 1832.<sup>36</sup>

What Pirie Smith later came to regard as the turning-point in his life was the day when a random encounter with a former schoolmate prompted him to try and learn Latin by private study. Stimulated by the initial success of his efforts, the young craftsman decided to apply for admission at King's College in Old Aberdeen. Having passed the entrance examination, he successfully studied from 1832–1836, living on his earnings as a private tutor. On the strength of his M.A. degree, he was then appointed as a school teacher, first in the small town of Kincardine O'Neil and afterwards at the Aberdeen West End Academy, a prestigious private school conducted at that time by Peter Robertson, a former teacher of his. When Peter Robertson unexpectedly died in December 1842, Pirie Smith succeeded him as school director and married his daughter Jane, who had also been teaching in her late father's school. However, it was only shortly afterwards when the Disruption of 1843 and his ordination as a minister of the Free Church of Scotland changed his course of life decisively. Yet even in his new and very different sphere of influence, the former teacher and school director found an outlet for his educational bent and skill. As his second-youngest daughter Alice recalled many years later:<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele II (FP), 1–2.

<sup>35</sup> Autobiographical sketch of W.P. Smith (FP), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Autobiographical sketch of W.P. Smith (FP), 16–17.

<sup>37</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 18–22: 'Er richtete Abendklassen für junge Männer ein, unterrichtete sie und hielt ihnen Vorträge. Wir hatten eine elektrische Maschine und

He set up evening classes for young men, teaching them and lecturing to them. We had an electric generator and a magic lantern with astronomical charts at home, which father had bought for these classes, and viewing them occasionally in winter in our children's room would always give us enormous pleasure. [...] When the brothers grew up, father taught them himself until they entered University and passed the entrance examination connected with this. [...] But every boy from the whole area who was keen to learn knew that he only had to approach father and point out his wishes and plans. When he was convinced that there was a determination to learn, he had the candidate come and see him every morning and taught him in the study side by side with his own sons. [...] All his spare hours, which became more numerous as he grew older, he divided up between reading and mathematics. Indefatigably he worked for the solution of difficult problems. The wearier he was, the more intent he was on mathematics, said the boys. With a youthful boast they also maintained that he was constantly or at least most of the time working on a problem which was insoluble. It seems that mathematics restored his mental equilibrium and virtually exercised a tranquilizing effect on his nervous system.

Just how much her father depended on this kind of relaxation becomes apparent from some further remarks of his daughter:<sup>38</sup>

In those days people didn't talk about nerves, but they were often suffering from being nervous without knowing it. I know now that Father was a very nervous man. [...] He was often so weary and nervous and could not bear with the noise we made, even when we were just cheerfully chatting and laughing together in the evenings.

This was obviously not a recent problem, as Pirie Smith numbered a 'constitutional nervousness' and 'natural impetuosity' among the foibles which hampered his progress as a student.<sup>39</sup> Nervousness and impetuosity were also prominent in his eldest son William, as may be inferred from various re-

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eine Laterna Magica mit astronomischen Platten zu Hause, die Vater für diese Klassen angeschafft hatte, und deren Vorführung mal im Winter in unserer Kinderstube uns stets ungeheure Freude machte. [...] Als die Brüder heranwuchsen, unterrichtete sie Vater selber bis zum Eintritt in die Universität und die damit zusammenhängende Stipendienprüfung. [...] Aber auch jeder Junge in der ganzen weiteren Umgebung, der gern lernen wollte, wußte, daß er nur zu Vater kommen brauchte und ihm seine Wünsche und Pläne darlegen. War er überzeugt, daß ein fester Wille zum Lernen vorhanden sei, ließ er den Betreffenden alle Morgen kommen und unterrichtete ihn im Studierzimmer mit den eigenen Söhnen. [...] Alle freien Stunden, deren es bei zunehmendem Alter immer mehr wurden, teilte er zwischen Lesen und Mathematik. Unermüdllich arbeitete er an der Lösung schwerer Probleme. Je abgesspannter er war, desto mehr trieb er Mathematik, sagten die Jungen. Mit jugendlicher Überhebung behaupteten sie auch, daß er stets oder wenigstens meist an einem Problem herumarbeitete, das unlösbar war. Die Mathematik schien ihm einen geistigen Ausgleich zu verschaffen und geradezu beruhigend auf sein Nervensystem zu wirken.'

<sup>38</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 21 and 23: 'Damals sprach man nicht von Nerven, aber man litt doch unbewußt oft darunter. Ich weiß jetzt, daß Vater ein sehr nervöser Mann war. [...] Er war oft so abgesspannt und nervös und konnte unseren Lärm meist nicht vertragen, auch nicht, wenn wir alle zusammen abends fröhlich plauderten und lachten.'

<sup>39</sup> Autobiographical sketch of W.P. Smith (FP), 35.

marks made by his family and friends. According to his sister Ellen, he ‘was always restless at his work’ and ‘would only sit a few minutes when he would be up and kneeling on the chair, then Mother or Father would say “Sit down Willie” and with a glance up, down he would sit but it was only a few minutes when he was up again.’<sup>40</sup> A similar note is sounded in a letter which the young student sent his father, complaining that for several days his nerves had made him unable to work.<sup>41</sup> ‘Even in small things he was impetuous, and he was apt to be impatient of the minor ceremonies of life’, note his biographers, quoting their common friend T.M. Lindsay with a graphic description of ‘the slight, eager figure, with flashing eyes, restless motions, rapid utterance.’<sup>42</sup> ‘Even by his walk, with its quick, irregular roll, one could single him out at a distance in the street’, recalled his friend James Bryce.<sup>43</sup> At what proved to be the beginning of Smith’s last fatal illness, Emily Wright told Michael Jan de Goeje, ‘He gives himself no chance of recovery in England, has far too much quicksilver in his composition.’<sup>44</sup>

Pirie Smith’s autobiographical sketch covers the period from his earliest recollections to the end of his course of studies. It is characterised by the endeavour to present a precise and factually accurate account of his life, but also by the author’s firm conviction of his having been guided by a benevolent divine will. ‘I daresay most people will be disposed to laugh at this incident but to me it was a clear instance of the action of an overruling and allruling providence’, is his verdict on what other people would probably have called a serendipity. ‘I was led, like the blind, by a way that I knew not’, we read in allusion to Isaiah 42:16 with regard to a similar incident.<sup>45</sup> This belief in providence was shared by his mother, who once confided to him that even before he was born she was convinced that she would give birth to a son and that her son would one day become a minister.<sup>46</sup>

Much less is known of Smith’s mother, Jane Robertson. According to James Bryce, she was ‘a woman of great force of character, who retained till her death, at seventy-six years of age, the full exercise of her keen intelligence.’<sup>47</sup> As Smith’s biographers put it:<sup>48</sup>

Mrs. Smith, a model of concentrated though wholly undemonstrative motherly concern, was the dominating influence in all the material affairs of the family. She devoted herself so entirely to her duties, and ruled so unobtrusively, that unobserv-

<sup>40</sup> CUL 7476 M 5, 2, quoted in BLACK and CHRYSTAL 1912, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Letter dated 3 November 1869 (CUL 7449 C 123).

<sup>42</sup> BLACK and CHRYSTAL 1912, 561 and 563.

<sup>43</sup> BRYCE 1903, 324.

<sup>44</sup> Letter dated 2 January 1890 (BUL BPL 2389).

<sup>45</sup> Autobiographical sketch of W.P. Smith (FP), 13 and 17.

<sup>46</sup> Autobiographical sketch of W.P. Smith (FP), 6.

<sup>47</sup> BRYCE 1903, 312.

<sup>48</sup> BLACK and CHRYSTAL 1912, 23–24.

ant persons often failed to appreciate the charm of her character and intellect. Her only relaxations were reading, walks, and conversation with her eldest son and her husband, who relied so absolutely on her judgment and her care that even her shortest absences caused him to be restless and depressed.

Born on 20 January 1821, Jane Robertson was the eldest of three daughters of the teacher and school director Peter Robertson. William Pirie Smith had got to know his future father-in-law as early as 1818, while he himself was still a pupil, maintaining in his autobiographical sketch that he ‘surpassed all the men I have ever known as a teacher and a manager of boys. He was also a good musician and an accomplished draughtsman.’<sup>49</sup> Jane Robertson’s mother, Isabella Giles, was a sister of James Giles (1801–1870), a landscape painter much admired by Queen Victoria.<sup>50</sup> An early widower, Peter Robertson had married a second time, but the children by his first wife did not get on too well with their stepmother.<sup>51</sup> After the death of Peter Robertson in December 1842, his widow worked as a seamstress, expecting her eldest daughter to assist her, although she continued to teach all day in her late father’s school. But if 23 year old Jane had expected that a marriage would necessarily improve her unsatisfactory situation, her hopes were thwarted for he time being, as her daughter Alice recalled:<sup>52</sup>

Father’s mother and sister moved into the young couple’s flat. Father regarded this as a self-evident duty, but for the young wife it meant a hard time. She was patronized a good deal and found no sympathy for her very different manner. But she was too gentle to make it hard for Father and bore things silently. [...] Thus a complete release was achieved only when 1 ½ or 2 years later Father moved into the country. How mother must have rejoiced at it! It is true that Father offered his mother and sister to take them with him, but they did not want to leave the city, and to be able to leave with a clear conscience towards his mother, Father gave the elderly lady all his savings.

The difficult financial situation of the young family may well explain Pirie Smith’s prolonged negotiations with the session and the deacons’ court in order to obtain an improved stipend.<sup>53</sup> It is also reflected in the childhood

<sup>49</sup> Autobiographical sketch of W. P. Smith (FP), 7.

<sup>50</sup> See *Aspects* 2001.

<sup>51</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 25.

<sup>52</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 26: ‘In die Wohnung des jungen Paares zogen Vaters Mutter und Schwester. Daß dies geschehe, betrachtete Vater als eine selbstverständliche Pflicht seinerseits. Für die junge Frau bedeutete es aber eine schwere Zeit. Sie wurde sehr bevormundet und fand für ihre ganz andere Art kein Verständnis. Aber sie war zu lieb, um es Vater schwer zu machen und trug schweigend. [...] Die völlige Erlösung kam also erst, als Vater 1 ½ bis 2 Jahre später aufs Land zog. Wie mag sich Mutter darüber gefreut haben! Allerdings bot Vater Mutter und Schwester an, sie mitzunehmen, aber sie wollten nicht aus der Stadt heraus, und um mit ruhigem Gewissen seiner Mutter gegenüber ziehen zu können, übergab der Vater der alternden Frau seine ganzen Ersparnisse.’

<sup>53</sup> See WITHRINGTON 1995, 46. According to his daughter Alice, her father not only



recollections of his second-youngest daughter Alice who maintained that despite her mother's thriftiness, the small stipend was hardly enough for the minister's big family.<sup>54</sup> Yet what is most prominent in Alice's recollections of her mother is the latter's untiring concern for the welfare of her husband and children and the creative imagination which she displayed in all sorts of handicrafts.<sup>55</sup> Thus we may suppose that the considerable interest and taste in paintings and engravings which Alice's elder brother William later displayed was partly inherited and partly fostered by his mother. Presumably it was also encouraged by his mother's uncle James Giles, as Smith later came to be on friendly terms with the portrait and landscape painters George and Archibald Reid and with the art collectors John Forbes White, John Irvine Smith and Alexander Macdonald of Kepplestone.<sup>56</sup> Music, on the other hand, appears to have held but little or no attraction at all to Smith who is said to have found it difficult to recognize the national anthem when it was being played.<sup>57</sup> According to his biographers, he 'was determined to have exact and accurate information on this subject as on all others, and somewhat unreasonably used to be angry with people who "were interested in a mild way" without performing the fundamental brain-work necessary for an understanding of harmony and theory.'<sup>58</sup>

While it is evident from Alice Smith's memoirs that her mother exerted a considerable influence on the education of her daughters, it is difficult to know if this also applied in the case of her sons, whose education appears to have lain mainly in the hands of their father. Obviously, both the spirit of the times and the Free Church ethos encouraged paternalism rather than female independence in these as in other matters. As William Robertson Nicoll, son of Pirie Smith's colleague Harry Nicoll, eulogized the ministers' wives in the Presbytery of Alford: 'More devoted wives never could be found; no women ever lived who more completely identified themselves with every thought and word and labour of their husbands.'<sup>59</sup> However, while some ministers' wives may well have prided themselves on their subordination, others may just as well have made a point of exercising their influence in such discreet and subtle ways that few outsiders would notice it. In any case, it is probably significant that John Forbes White in the very first

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gave his mother all his savings before moving to Keig, but also used to spend part of his salary as a minister to support both her and his sister in their old age (Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I, 13, 26 and II, 87).

<sup>54</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 19.

<sup>55</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 25–28.

<sup>56</sup> See MORRISON 1996.

<sup>57</sup> WHITE 1897, 200. This is evidently based on an anecdote related by J. G. Frazer (see ACKERMAN 2005, 108).

<sup>58</sup> BLACK and CHRYSAL 1912, 19.

<sup>59</sup> NICOLL 1900, 249.

biographical sketch of Smith maintained that it was ‘to his mother [...] he doubtless largely owed the mental activity that distinguished him through his whole life.’<sup>60</sup> Moreover, just as Pirie Smith admitted that he had ‘always liked best to tackle difficult problems and to work them out without extraneous assistance either from books or men’, his daughter Alice recorded that Jane Smith fostered the same kind of self-reliance in her children. ‘In educational matters there was never a difference of opinion between them’, she claimed, adding, ‘When we were unable to do a thing or did not feel like doing it and said “But I can’t,” there was just one answer: “If you don’t at first succeed, try, try, try again.”’<sup>61</sup> Finally, it should be noted that Smith – like his mother, but unlike many academic colleagues then and now – was famous for his practical abilities and down-to-earth frame of mind. ‘He seemed to know everything’, J. G. Frazer wistfully recalled. ‘And with great knowledge he had, what often does not go with it, wisdom and the most sober common sense in everything, from affairs of state down to the most ordinary matters of daily life.’<sup>62</sup>

An account of Smith’s childhood and adolescence would be incomplete if it did not pay due attention to his numerous siblings and the fact that he was the eldest son. Apart from an infant who was stillborn, Smith had six sisters and three brothers, although not all of them lived to adulthood. The first to die was Eliza who had been born in 1852 and passed away after a prolonged illness shortly before her fifth birthday in 1857. According to Smith’s sister Alice, her mother never really got over this loss and continued to maintain that the doctor had not known how to treat the child properly.<sup>63</sup> As Smith was almost exactly six years older than his little sister, this was presumably the first fatality which he consciously encountered, and we may wonder if it had a bearing on the experience which his father assumed to have occurred around that time:<sup>64</sup>

Before he was twelve years old, he had several attacks of illness so severe that once and again his life was despaired of, but also in the course of these years we had the consolation of learning that a work of grace was wrought upon him and in such a form that he was at length delivered from the fear of death and made partaker of a hope full of immortality. That the change wrought upon him was real, we had

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<sup>60</sup> WHITE 1899, 189.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. the autobiographical sketch of W. P. Smith (FP), 21, and Ms. Alice Smith Thiele (FP) I, 29–30: ‘In Fragen der Erziehung war niemals zwischen ihnen eine Meinungsverschiedenheit. [...] Konnten wir etwas nicht oder hatten wir keine rechte Lust und sagten: “Das kann ich aber nicht”, gab es nur eine Antwort: “If you don’t at first succeed, try, try, try again.”’

<sup>62</sup> Letter to J. F. White dated 15 December 1897 (ACKERMAN 2005, 106).

<sup>63</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele II (FP), 60.

<sup>64</sup> Biographical sketch by W. P. Smith (AU MS 3674), 2. The passage is quoted at length in BLACK and CHRYSAL 1912, 12–13.

many satisfactory evidences – not the less satisfactory that there was no parade of piety, no sanctimoniousness, but a cheerful performance of daily duty, truthfulness in word and deed, and a conscientiousness which we could not help thinking was sometimes almost morbid. I never knew a boy with so sensitive a nature and so tender a conscience.

Since conversion was such a vital experience among Evangelicals, many parents looked anxiously for signs of it in their children, numerous Victorian descriptions of conversion being still extant. In fact, the Scottish Evangelical mother of the future Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone is known to have recorded her son's conversion at about the same age.<sup>65</sup> Certainly, the expectancy of conversion on the part of Smith's parents, their worries over his own state of health and the fatal illness of his little sister may all have contributed to producing the result recorded by his father.

Due to the geographical isolation of the family home, relations among members of the family were of paramount importance, especially during the frequently severe winters, when the children would not be allowed to venture out of doors. Moreover, there was a certain sense of aloofness due to the fact that a Free Church minister was not supposed to be on equal terms with his congregation. 'We were fully aware of our dignity as children of a minister, and we also knew that our parents were no ordinary people', his daughter Alice recalled. 'We were on friendly terms with everybody, but close companionship was unknown to us.'<sup>66</sup> This attitude clearly also prevailed within the Smith household, for although we occasionally hear of a servant maid and a children's maid, we are not even told their names.<sup>67</sup>

Another conspicuous characteristic of the Smith family was the children's unequal age distribution. On the one hand, there were Mary Jane (\*1845), William (\*1846) and George (\*1848), who formed as it were a group of their own, being jointly sent to Aberdeen in 1862 in order to continue their education. One might argue that this group also included Isabella (\*1849) and Ellen (\*1851), but Isabella soon proved to be both more timid and less intellectually capable than her elder siblings, while Ellen was clearly felt to be significantly younger by Mary Jane, William and George, who had all been born within less than three years. As mentioned before, a little girl named Eliza had died at the age of four in 1857, so that Smith's siblings Charles (\*1854), Alice (\*1858), Lucy (\*1859) and Herbert (\*1862) constituted as it were a group of their own, styled 'the children' by Mary Jane,

<sup>65</sup> BEBBINGTON 1989, 7.

<sup>66</sup> See Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 100, 'Wir waren uns unserer Würde als Pastorenkinder ganz bewußt und wußten auch, daß unsere Eltern keine Alltagsmenschen waren', and 31, 'Gut Freund waren wir mit jedermann, enge Kameradschaft kannten wir nicht'.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, BLACK and CHRYSTAL 1912, 12, Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 28, 39, 46 and Ms. Alice Smith Thiele II (FP), 93.

William and George.<sup>68</sup> The latter designation incidentally indicates the way in which the brothers and sisters related to their parents, the three eldest tending to be treated almost like adults as they grew up. This, however, applied fully only to the two boys, as the children were educated along strictly paternalistic lines. 'My far-back recollections', Smith's sister Ellen wrote after her brother's death, 'are all mingled with such scenes as were enacted out-of-doors in summer and in the nursery in winter when there were tremendous harangues chiefly on the superiority of the Lords over the Ladies of Creation with Willie always leading while we sat round and admired!!'<sup>69</sup> The habits thus inculcated at an early age were not easily cast aside in later life, as we can see from Ellen's account of life with her elder student brother at Edinburgh: 'I made myself scarce when anyone was in, except perhaps Prof. Lindsay, who was next door neighbour one session, and who used to pop in the middle of the evening for about 5 minutes merry chat which both enjoyed and I listened eagerly to, in my corner.'<sup>70</sup>

### 3. *Family life and education*

Looking at the family life in the manse at Keig, a conspicuous place was taken by the children's religious education which structured their every day, week and year. Following the example of his mother and of many other evangelical parents at the time, Pirie Smith kept up the practice of family worship, conducted both in the mornings and in the evenings.<sup>71</sup>

First a psalm was sung, and then a chapter was read, Old Testament in the morning and New Testament in the evening. It started with the youngest child, everybody reading his verse according to age. Then came the boarders, the servants, Mother and finally Father. Woe betide the child who had failed to pay attention and lost the plot. Father's look or even the way in which he pronounced the culprit's name was crushing. Starting with the First Book of Moses, almost the whole of the Bible was read straight through with very few exceptions. How boring were many passages in

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<sup>68</sup> See BLACK and CHRYSTAL 1912, 16.

<sup>69</sup> CUL 7476 M 5.

<sup>70</sup> CUL 7476 M 5.

<sup>71</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 28: 'Es wurde erst gesungen, dann wurde ein Kapitel vorgelesen, morgens im Alten Testament, abends im Neuen. Mit dem jüngsten Kind fing es an, jedes las dem Alter nach seinen Vers, dann kamen die Pensionäre, die Dienstmädchen, Mutter und zuletzt Vater. Wehe dem Kind, das nicht aufgepaßt und den Platz verloren hatte. Vaters Blick oder bloß, wie er den Namen des Schuldigen aussprach, war vernichtend. Mit dem I. Buch Mose wurde angefangen und mit nur verschwindend wenig Ausnahmen wurde gerade durchgelesen. Wie langweilig war einem Kind vieles in den Gesetzbüchern, aber wir lernten die Bibel kennen. Zuletzt knieten alle hin und Vater betete.'

the legal books to a child, but we did get to know the Bible. In conclusion, all knelt down and Father said a prayer.

The significance of the Scottish Psalms in the manse at Keig is well illustrated by Alice's childhood recollections:<sup>72</sup>

For many years only these were sung in our Scottish Free Church during service. During the family worship in the mornings and evenings, 3–4 verses used to be sung regularly, later to the accompaniment of a piano when one of the sisters had made enough progress in playing the piano. By and by we had to learn all 150 psalms by heart. [...] When we girls went for a walk in the afternoon and were in high spirits, we would often sing the psalms lustily on those solitary country lanes where we would hardly meet anybody. It happened quite spontaneously, and we did it to give vent to our frequently exuberant feelings. We were especially fond of the enthusiastic or triumphant ones such as Ps. 24, 'The earth belongs unto the Lord, / and all that it contains – Ye gates, lift up your heads on high; / ye doors that last for aye, / Be lifted up, that so the King / of glory enter may.'

As Alice's sister Ellen remembered from the time which she spent together with her student brother in Edinburgh: 'Sundays we always went to Church together in the morning, racing along at a terrible pace and at night we had as regularly a practice of Psalm tunes.'<sup>73</sup> 'He loved the mountains', was J. G. Frazer later to recall, 'and one of my most vivid recollections of him is his sitting on a hillside looking over the mountains and chanting or rather crooning some of the Hebrew psalms in a sort of rapt ecstatic way. I did not understand them, but I suppose they were some of the verses in which the psalmist speaks of lifting up his eyes to the hills.'<sup>74</sup> In his research on the Old Testament, Smith reverted to the Psalms at various stages, most notably in a lecture 'On the Translation and Use of the Psalms for the Public Worship of the Church,' a detailed study on 'The Sixteenth Psalm,' a general essay on 'The Poetry of the Old Testament,' and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article 'Psalms'.<sup>75</sup> In a telling passage, Smith declared the Book of Psalms to be 'a model of devotional nearness to God, which we can never hope to tran-

<sup>72</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 27: 'Lange Jahre hindurch wurden nur diese in unserer Schottischen Freien Kirche beim Gottesdienst gesungen. Morgens und abends bei der Hausandacht wurden regelmäßig 3–4 Verse gesungen, später mit Klavierbegleitung, als die eine Schwester dazu im Klavierspiel weit genug war. Auswendig lernen mußten wir nach und nach die sämtlichen 150. [...] Wenn wir Mädchen nachmittags spazieren gingen und gehobener Stimmung waren, kam es oft vor, daß wir auf den einsamen Landwegen, wo wir kaum einen Menschen trafen, die Psalmen laut hinaus schmetterten. Es geschah ganz spontan, wir machten dadurch unseren oft überströmenden Gefühlen Luft. Besonders liebten wir die begeisterten oder triumphierenden Gesänge, wie z.B. Ps. 24: "Die Erde ist des Herrn und was drinnen ist – Machet die Tore weit und die Türen in der Welt hoch, daß der König der Ehren einziehe!"'

<sup>73</sup> CUL 7476 M 5.

<sup>74</sup> Letter to J. F. White dated 15 December 1897 (ACKERMAN 2005, 103).

<sup>75</sup> See SMITH 1904, 1876h, 1877g and 1886b.

scend', referring to the Pauline view, 'according to which we are men, while the Old Testament saints were but children', and advertising the Scottish Psalter on account of its stylistic closeness to the original.<sup>76</sup>

Now in translation it is essential that this model should be kept in all its simplicity. Every artificial touch, every trace of modern taste, must be avoided. [...] A translation of the Psalms for devotional use must be, above all things, simple, even naïve. This great requisite our Scottish version has fully realized, and to have done so is merit that outweighs a hundred faults.

Apart from the Psalms, the most important texts used in the children's religious education were the biblical narratives and the Westminster Shorter Catechism.<sup>77</sup>

When we were small, we went down to Mother into the parlour every Sunday afternoon. She would tell us Biblical stories, both from the Old Testament and from the New Testament, quite simply and in the main with the words of the Bible, giving only such explanations as are necessary for children. She also had a set of colourful cards which illustrated the narratives and made them more interesting. As we grew older, the Sunday afternoon lessons did not stop, but merely changed in form. The whole household (except Father, who rested, and the big brothers, who were already at University) gathered every Sunday afternoon in the former children's room, where Mother made a regular enquiry about Biblical History and the Catechism. Two chapters from the Bible (Old Testament history) had to be thoroughly prepared, and we were asked questions one by one. Then the Catechism was the subject of enquiry. I think there were 150 questions and answers. Mother asked the questions, and we had to give the answers.

The comprehensive and detailed knowledge of the Biblical text which Smith acquired in this way is well illustrated by an anecdote transmitted both by his mother and his sister Alice:<sup>78</sup>

It was a favourite occupation with the younger members of the family, when he came home over a Sabbath (which he often did when he lived in Abd<sup>n</sup>) to gather round him, each having a Bible in hand & try to puzzle him. They looked out a

<sup>76</sup> SMITH 1904, 64–65.

<sup>77</sup> Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 65–66: 'Als wir klein waren, gingen wir jeden Sonntagnachmittag hinunter zu Mutter in die Wohnstube, sie erzählte uns Biblische Geschichten, beides aus dem Alten und Neuen Testament, ganz einfach, in der Hauptsache in den Bibelworten mit der nur für Kinder nötigen Erläuterung. [...] Sie hatte auch Serien von bunten Karten, die das Erzählte darstellten und interessanter machten. Als wir älter wurden, hörte der Sonntagnachmittags-Unterricht nicht auf, seine Form änderte sich nur. Der ganze Haushalt außer Vater, der ruhte, und die großen Brüder, die schon auf der Universität waren, versammelte sich jeden Sonntagnachmittag in der früheren Kinderstube, wo Mutter Bibelgeschichte und Katechismus ordentlich abfragte. Zwei Kapitel aus der Bibel (alttestamentliche Geschichte) mußten wir gut vorbereiten und die Fragen gingen ringsum der Reihe nach. Dann kam der Katechismus daran. Ich glaube, es waren 150 Fragen und Antworten. Die Fragen stellte Mutter, die Antworten mußten wir geben.'

<sup>78</sup> Biographical sketch by Jane Smith (AUL MS 3674), 8. Cf. Ms. Alice Smith Thiele I (FP), 93–94.