

**THE  
SYDNEY SMITH  
ASSOCIATION**



**NEWSLETTER**

Issue 7

April 2002

## **The Sydney Smith Association**

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Dr Peter Payan, The Revd Norman Taylor

## The Sydney Smith Association

### Our Aims

- To perpetuate the memory and achievements of Sydney Smith
- To cultivate appreciation of the principles for which he stood
- To support the churches connected with his career
- To help in the preservation of manuscripts and memorabilia relating to him and his family
- To arrange periodic events, receptions and services in keeping with his inclinations

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### Coming Events and other business

The AGM will be held in London on Saturday 21 September in the Army and Navy Club, Pall Mall. Members will be met by our new Chairman, Randolph Vigne. Tea will be served at 5.30pm and at 6pm Canon Eric James will give a talk before the AGM begins. Refreshments will be available afterwards.

On Sunday 22 September a service will be held in St Paul's Cathedral. The Sermon and Prayers will acknowledge Sydney Smith and his contribution to the life of the Church, and we will be able to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the first edition of the *Edinburgh Review*. The address will be given by Canon Philip Buckler. Seats will be reserved for members and their friends. This is a great tribute to Sydney Smith and it is hoped that members will show their appreciation by attending the service and bringing friends and relatives.

For those members who have not made other arrangements the following options are available:

#### Saturday 21 September 2002

- 1.00pm Lunch at the Polish Club, 55 Princes Gate (Exhibition Road). Robin Price has kindly booked a table and will greet members
- 3 to 4pm 14 Doughty Street, Sydney's first London home, will be open to members. By courtesy of Michael Horowitz and Gillian Darley or
- 3.30pm Trip on the Thames, organised by Mary Beaumont
- 8.00pm Dinner in The Marlborough Room, The Army and Navy Club

#### Sunday 22 September 2002

- 10.30am Visit to St Paul's Library. Kindly arranged by Joe Wisdom
- 1.00pm Lunch in Refectory Restaurant in St Paul's Crypt

Full details on the enclosed application form.



### Accommodation

Already some members living in the London Area have kindly offered accommodation to country members. If anyone would like to take up their kind offer, please let the Membership Secretary know. If anyone else is willing to offer a bed to a country member, could they do likewise. Tel. 01653 618334. Email [pjdigggle@bigfoot.com](mailto:pjdigggle@bigfoot.com).

### Subscriptions

Subscriptions have not risen since our formation in 1996. They are due for payment on 1 March and to those who pay on time and by standing order we are most grateful. Unfortunately many members overlook the small amount due (£5 single and £8 joint) and the cost of collection never seems to diminish!

### Membership

If you enjoy your membership please tell others about the Association and if you have an Email address please let the Hon. Treasurer ([ama5@york.ac.uk](mailto:ama5@york.ac.uk)) or Membership Secretary ([pjdigggle@bigfoot.com](mailto:pjdigggle@bigfoot.com)) have yours. This will help reduce postage costs.

### **York Lunches**

Two lunches were held last year in the Judges' Lodging. As Chaplain to the High Sheriff in all probability Sydney visited the Lodging from time to time.

As with our London lunches we find that it adds to the interest and the fun of the occasion if someone introduces a topical subject for discussion about which Sydney might have written or about which he might have felt strongly. We do not expect to reflect his views, which anyhow might well have changed with time, but perhaps can aspire to his common sense. These discussions start by being general and then gradually develop into individual exchange of ideas between people seated next to each other. We also like to feel that these lunches should be entirely informal and everyone who is short of time should feel able to leave whenever they want.

The topics for discussion were inspired by two of Sydney's somewhat impish sermons preached before an assembly of the most distinguished Lawyers, Judges, Magistrates gathered together for the Assizes in 1826. His subject seemed an appropriate topic for today's discussion. The text from one sermon was taken from Luke Chapter 10 Verse 25: 'And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying: Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' The other text was from Acts 23 Verse 3: The Judge that smites contrary to the law.

For details about future lunches please contact Peter Digggle 01653 618334. Email [pjdigggle@bigfoot.com](mailto:pjdigggle@bigfoot.com)

### **East Anglia Lunches**

Holy Mackerel! Michael Belfrage of Campsea Ashe near Woodbridge, Suffolk, writes: 'East Anglian Group, formed last year, is now established. Its aim is to continue to hold lunches in East Anglia which encourage further knowledge of Sydney Smith embodying some of his favourite recipes. Speakers are welcome, as are existing members living within the East Anglian area.' Michael asks those interested to contact him on 01728 748087. As inducements, he thinks mackerel in season and almond tart may help.

### **London Lunches**

The Boisdale lunches are happy affairs which attract a wide variety of London members and some from further afield, who combine other reasons for visiting the Great Wen with a friendly gathering of like minds. It was suggested that a topic chosen and *briefly* introduced by a speaker could encourage a general discussion of how Sydney Smith might have reacted to the subject. Recently topics have been presented by Peter Payan, Deidre Bryan-Brown and Gillian Nolan, and we are grateful to them all. It is hoped that our next lunch on 5 June will feature a discussion led by Randolph Vigne on Sydney's thoughts on the Church of England today. All members are invited to apply for a place but, as sixteen is our limit, first come.... Mary Beaumont can be contacted at 55 Belmont Park, London SE13 5BW or by Email [maryb@maryb.demon.co.uk](mailto:maryb@maryb.demon.co.uk).

### **Combe Florey Revisited**

We made a happy return after four years to Combe Florey for the 2001 Annual Association Weekend. A splendid tea in the Village Hall on Saturday 29 September launched the proceedings; and we are very grateful to the Combe Florey Women's Institute for providing this, and an excellent buffet lunch the following day. Their hospitality made a fine beginning and end to our proceedings.

Alan Bell took the chair at a brief AGM and presented apologies from Peter Digggle, our Vice-Chairman, who had done so much preparatory work for the weekend. He reported on successful luncheons held in London and Yorkshire, and thanked the organisers. A Committee meeting had been held to discuss future arrangements. Alan was himself retiring from the chair, but would remain on the Committee, and Randolph Vigne was proposed as his successor. Mary Beaumont, Frank Collieson (the new Editor of the *Newsletter*), and Peter Payan were also proposed as additional members of the Committee. We were also delighted to hear that two long-standing members of the Association had accepted our request that they be Patrons: Lord Knutsford, and Bishop Hugh Montefiore, who would be this year's preacher. Professor Arnold Arthurs, our Honorary Treasurer, assured us that the Association's finances were in good order, and the books open for inspection.



The Chairman then introduced our guest speaker, William Thomas, Student and senior history tutor of Christ Church, Oxford, and an expert on the political history of the early nineteenth century. He gave us a fascinating talk on Lord Macaulay (the 'book in breeches') and his relationship with the man to whom he gave the name 'the Smith of Smiths': Sydney, who deliciously and affectionately observed that Macaulay 'has occasional flashes of silence, that make his conversation perfectly delightful'. A lecture of academic length, it held our whole heterogeneous gathering spellbound.

Afterwards we walked the length of the village to Sydney's old Rectory, where Mary Read most generously entertained us to drinks and canapés and where a lovely evening enabled us to enjoy the beautiful gardens. Returning to the Village Hall, we spent the rest of the evening dining and wining together in the way that Sydney loved, if not on his scale. Sally Fernando once again provided an excellent meal, and Alan Bell, in a Chairman's farewell gesture, kindly donated the wine.

On Sunday Mattins took place in the village church, by kind permission of the Reverend Margaret Armstrong, who welcomed us; and Bishop Hugh Montefiore preached the sermon (to be found elsewhere in this *Newsletter*), then dedicated a bronze plaque of Sydney on the south wall to the left of the main door. After lunch, members departed to their various destinations, delighted to have met together again in honour of Sydney Smith.

Norman Taylor

**From the pulpit at Combe Florey  
Sunday 30 September 2001  
Bishop Hugh Montefiore**

I feel some trepidation, preaching in the same church as Sydney Smith once did, even speaking from the very same pulpit as he used. My first impression is surprise that he was able to wedge his considerable bulk inside it. We have an account of Sydney's preaching style from the hand of the diarist Charles Greville: 'very good; manner impressive, voice sonorous and agreeable, *rather* familiar but not offensively so, language simple and unadorned. Sermon clever and illustrative.' Another diarist who heard him in St Paul's pronounced the sermon was with great purity of thought and purity of style, and sometimes brilliancy of phrase and expression, and delivered with great power and emphasis... It was by far the best sermon I have ever heard.' *O si sic omnes!* if only we could all be the same!

We are now in September 2001, and Sydney left Combe Florey for the last time over a century and half ago, in August 1844, feeling dizzy and ill. He died in

London the following February. In 1829 Sydney - I shall call him by his Christian name - had exchanged his Yorkshire parish for Combe Florey. He was Rector here for fifteen years, but of course only resident for a small part of that time. When first instituted, he was also Prebend of Bristol Cathedral. Then in 1831, when he was sixty years old, and had abandoned at last all hope of a bishopric, Sydney was made a Canon of St Paul's as a kind of consolation prize by Lord Grey, the Whig Prime Minister. Sydney's custom was to spend a couple of months here at Combe Florey over Christmas, and another couple of months in the summer, with the rest of his time in London. He also retained a small living in Devonshire, which he very seldom visited, save on the occasion when, in his own words, 'there was a certain rebellion of my curate'. We know nothing, or at least I know nothing, of the curate who would have taken services here for eight months of a year in his absence.

When Sydney came to Combe Florey, he made great changes to the Rectory. Sydney loved altering houses. He had rebuilt his vicarage in his earlier living at Foston-le-Clay in Yorkshire. Here he refashioned the rectory, building a large library lined with books, and the huge room we visited yesterday looking out on the extensive garden, with flower beds, a drive lined with elms, and even outdoor grapes. His sense of humour is shown by his pretending that he grew oranges by tying them to trees, and he once even tied antlers on two donkeys to pretend they were deer! In the rebuilding of the rectory twenty-eight workmen were engaged, but he did not think very highly of them. 'Every day's absence from home costs me £10 in the villainy of carpenters and bricklayers,' he complained, 'for as I am my own architect Clerk of the Works, you may easily imagine what is done when I am absent.' He went on: 'what with the long torpor of the cider, and the heated air of the west, they all become boozey'.

Since I am preaching a sermon and not giving a panegyric, I have to admit that Sydney Smith was essentially an urban man, and he loved the social life of the metropolis, and, although visitors eased the monotony of the country, and particularly his daughter Saba, he soon got bored here. When Saba married, he wrote: 'I shall advertise for a daughter. I cannot get on without a daughter.' He called his new living 'a little paradise', but he also wrote: 'In the country I hibernate and lick my paws.' In 1837 he wrote: 'The evils of Combe Florey are its distance (150 miles), the badness of the season, the dullness and stupidity of a country parsonage in the winter. The goods of Combe Florey, are that our house is very warm and comfortable. He wrote to Macaulay, about whom you heard yesterday: 'There I am, sir, the priest of the Flowery Valley, in a delightful parsonage, about which I care a great deal, and a delightful country, about which I do not care a straw.' He called it 'a kind of healthy grave'. Sydney in Combe Florey rectory lived by the clock: prayers at 9, a carriage drive at 10, lunch at 1, dinner at 8, prayers at 10, bed at 11. He was very punctual. No one was late for meals twice.



When Sydney was a Canon of St Paul's, Rector of Combe Florey and also Vicar of the Devonshire living, he was a rich man, with an income of over £100,000 a year at today's prices, not to mention the tithe. That made him wealthier than some bishops, and the twenty-fourth highest paid incumbent in the Church of England. So he was able to indulge his taste for good food, as can be seen by the size of his paunch. A man who describes heaven as 'eating *pâtés de foie gras* to the sound of trumpets' is obviously not averse to the pleasures of the table. I mention these facts because today's New Testament reading consists of the parable of Dives and Lazarus. Sydney, although he became wealthy, was the very opposite of Lazarus. Far from despising a poor hungry man with sores, Sydney made a point of caring for the sick and feeding the hungry. He read medical books, kept notes on all his parishioners and ordered drugs from London. He did not think much of professional doctors. 'The sixth commandment is suspended by one medical diploma, from the North of England to the South', he wrote, although he added: 'When it comes to scarlet fever, I leave it to the professional and graduated homicides.' Having studied anatomy at Oxford and Edinburgh, he had in his rectory his own apothecary's room, crammed with medicines and with groceries which he gave to those in need. Sydney said of himself: 'I dine with the rich in London, and physic the poor in the country, passing from the sauces of Dives to the sores of Lazarus.'

No doubt his parishioners thought him a bit odd, but they certainly appreciated him. There is a charming story about Sydney having breakfast at Combe Florey one day when a poor woman came and asked him to christen her baby, who was very ill, and might die. Sydney left his breakfast immediately, went off to the cottage, and when he returned, he said: 'Why, I first gave it a dose of castor oil, and then I christened it, so now the poor child is ready for either world.'

Sydney was a very broad churchman and a staunch Church of England man. He disliked foreign missionaries' whom he believed did more harm than good. Once, when asked whether he would object to burying a Dissenter, he replied 'Not bury Dissenters! I should like to be burying them all day!' In his earlier years he had been unfairly caustic about Methodists. At the start of an article he began: 'We shall use the general term of Methodism, to designate these three classes of fanatics, not troubling ourselves to point out the finer shades and nicer discriminations of lunacy, but treating them all as in one general conspiracy against common sense, and rational orthodox Christianity.' Sydney also disliked Evangelicals, accusing Wilberforce of cant.

He was as strongly opposed to the High Church as he was to Evangelicals. When a Puseyite wrote to him, dating his letter by a Saint's Day, Sydney answered by dating his 'Washing Day'. He found Tractarianism incomprehensible. 'I wish you had witnessed, the other day at St Paul's, my incredible boldness in attacking the

Puseyites', he wrote. 'I told them that they made the Christian religion a religion of postures and ceremonies, of circumflexions and genuflexions, of garments and vestures, of ostentation and parade; ... and neglected the weightier matters of the law, -- justice, mercy, and the duties of life; and so forth...' 'I have not yet discovered of what I am to die, but I rather believe I shall be burnt alive by the Puseyites.' In the light of this it is not inappropriate that the patron of this living is the Simeon Trust.

'Justice, mercy, and the duties of life; and so forth.' That phrase encapsulates his religion. A contemporary wrote: 'I do not suppose that he had any dogmatic or doctrinal opinions in respect of religion; ...but he had the true religion of benevolence and charity, of peace and goodwill towards mankind.' Sydney himself said: 'True modest unobtrusive religion - charitable, forgiving, indulgent Christianity - is the greatest ornament and the greatest blessing that can reside in the mind of man.'

Sydney was not interested in theology. His nature revolted from the thought that God would condemn anyone because of a wrong belief about Christ's birth or the doctrine of the Trinity. He preached about Christ's teaching, not his person. Living a Christian life, building up a Christian character, these to him were all important. Sydney had a simple unclouded faith in God. When a French rationalist at a dinner party expressed his atheism, Sydney turned to him and said: 'Did you enjoy the soufflé?' The man said he had. Sydney riposted: 'And do you doubt the existence of the cook?' Again, his moral teaching was essentially practical. He did not teach that fornication was an evil: he did warn of its probably ruinous consequences. He did not tell his parishioners that poaching was a sin: he did point out that it led to pauperism. He was always on the side of the poor and underprivileged. 'The feasts and fasts of the Church of England are tolerably well kept', he once said, 'the rich keep the feasts and the poor keep the fasts.'

Perhaps we should remember that Sydney did not originally set out to be ordained: he wanted to follow his brother into the law, but his father would not support his training. As a Wykehamist, when he went to New College he automatically became a Fellow, and from that he drifted into the Church; first as a Curate, then as a Tutor, then as a Preacher and Lecturer in London, and then an Incumbent of a living. He stood up for his fellow clergy. When a man said to him 'If I had a son who was an idiot, by Jove, I'd make him a parson', Sydney replied: 'Very probably, but I see your father was of a different mind.'

Certainly he had a shadow side to his character. He was grossly overambitious to be a bishop, he could be most unfair in his criticism, and like the rest of us, he had his prejudices. Despite his liberal views about the world, he was very reactionary against reforms in the Church, especially where he himself was affected.



These flaws pale before his many virtues. We honour Sydney Smith on many counts. He was a brilliant preacher, and a brilliant lecturer in London, drawing crowds to listen to him. He shone especially at the dinner table, and was generally allowed to be the wittiest man in the England of his time. He was the friend of the great, but also made himself available to the poor and the humble. He was the founder of the *Edinburgh Review*, the first publication of its kind. He was a liberal, and an unrepentant Whig throughout his life. He was devoted to his family, a man of warmth and common sense, disliking stuffiness and reserve: he once described someone as having all the stiffness of a poker without its occasional warmth.

Today we honour him in this church because of his Christian character, his goodness and his tolerance, and his faithful ministry. If not in the Church, certainly in the world he was a liberal ahead of his time, urging religious tolerance, especially the emancipation of Roman Catholics, and he supported the repeal of penal laws in Ireland. He inveighed against the rigour of the poaching laws, and supported the education of women. He urged the reform of the universities and spoke against public school abuses.

Britain would have been a poorer place without him, and in this church where he ministered we say with conviction: Thanks be to God for his life.

#### **'Some books...**

...are to be tasted...swallowed...chewed...digested...': and some books are very hard to find, but always seem to be about until you really want them. Like Hesketh Pearson's *The Smith of Smiths* in that cherished Penguin 'biography blue' cover. But one turned up recently in York showing all signs of its fifty-four years of life; then, close by, a crisply youthful and hitherto unknown Hogarth Press paperback reprint of 1984. Equally elusive, but just found in the back room of a village stationer's and post office in Suffolk, is the OUP World's Classics 1981 paperback of *Selected Letters of Sydney Smith* edited by Nowell C. Smith and with a sparkling introduction by Auberon Waugh, one of our Association's first Patrons, who died in January 2001.

In his *Independent* obituary, James Fergusson wrote: 'In the flash and fizz of his "diaries", where Combe Florey (a place surely fictional) came to represent all that was ordinary and obviously decent - a Somerset touchstone by which everything might be judged - he was the precursor of nearly-true bestsellers from Adrian Mole to, it could be said, Bridget Jones.'

In the Village Hall last September in the far from fictional Combe Florey we were delighted to find Auberon Waugh's son Alexander at tea with us before the AGM. Months later, when we at last found the *Selected Letters*, we asked Alexander if we

might reprint these paragraphs from his father's introduction both to honour our former Patron and to celebrate our second visit to Combe Florey:

'He came to Combe Florey, Somerset, in 1829, soon after the death of his son, Douglas, in his early twenties. Smith was heartbroken, and this incident seems to have been the one great sorrow of his life. As he wrote on Douglas's tomb: "His life was blameless. His death was the first sorrow he ever occasioned his parents, but it was deep and lasting." By coincidence, Combe Florey was only a mile and a half away from the place where his father finally settled. Robert Smith, the father, bought, spoiled and then sold nineteen different houses in England, ultimately dying in Bishops Lydeard, Somerset in 1827 at the age of eighty-eight.

These last fifteen years would appear to have been the happiest in Smith's life. He rejoiced in the milder climate of Combe Florey and in the financial independence which came to him with the canonry at St Paul's. Ten years were spent in comparative affluence, after the death of his brother Courtenay left him richer by £50,000. For a man who remarked: "I can safely say I have been happier for every guinea I have gained", he should have been very happy indeed. Rebuilding the Rectory at Combe Florey, he created his first library - "a pretty odd room, dignified by the name of library" - about twenty-eight feet long and eight feet high ending in a bay-window supported by pillars, looking into the garden, and which he had obtained by throwing a pantry, a passage and a shoe-hole together.

This room, which still survives, was his pride and his delight. It was here that he remarked: "No furniture is so charming as books, even if you never open them or read a single word." It was in the garden outside that he paraded two donkeys with deers' antlers fastened on their heads, exclaiming: "There, Lady ---! You said the only thing this place wanted to make it perfect was deer; what do you say now?"

Beyond the garden is a steep valley with a beautiful hanging wood on one side. It was here, in order to impress on a visitor the mildness of the Combe Florey climate, that he tied oranges and lemons on the beech and oak trees.'

And it was in that perfect garden and that very 'pretty odd room' that we were privileged to drink and talk - thanks to Mary Read's gracious hospitality - on the enchanted evening of Saturday 29 September 2001.



## PS.

Our most notable recent find, again in book-productive York, was of the truly 'Now Scarce' variety: Nowell C. Smith's two-volume 1953 Oxford edition of *The Letters of Sydney Smith*. We bought it for ourself as a Christmas present on a day of happy reunion - and certainly the subsequent Yuletide glow did much to warm the numbness induced by the size of the cheque we had to write....

But readers may like to reflect on the old and all-too-familiar faces they encounter on the shelves, and share their yawns with us. Our own list of the three most readily found titles has long comprised: 1) *Jane Fonda's Workout Book*; 2) *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page* (2 vols); and 3) *Crump Folk Going Home*. Admittedly Page and the Crumps have been less visible of late, presumably at last nearing home -- but Jane continues to exercise us round every bend. In the improbable event that some members will wish to workout with her, let them proceed at stately valetudinarian pace to their nearest Oxfam, Red Cross, Cats Protection, NCH, Age Concern, Barnardo's.... No need to jog or sprint: Jane will surely be waiting for you.

## Yes, they do furnish a room....

It's always a pleasure, says Norman Taylor, to come across Sydney's name in unexpected places - in Simon Brett's detective story *So Much Blood*, for example. The amateur detective, Charles Parris, finds lodgings during the Edinburgh Festival with a local laird. The laird's own room is book-lined and, over sherry, Charles says, 'It's very comforting, all those books.' The laird replies, 'Yes. "No furniture is so charming as books, even if you never open them or read a single word." The Reverend Sydney Smith. Not a Scot himself, but for some time a significant luminary of Edinburgh society. Yes, my books are my life.'

## Netheravon Unvisited

'Stopped too at Upavon church, thinking it was where Sydney Smith was the incumbent for many lonely, isolated years of his life. Saw no signs of his memory, no mention on the list of incumbents. Drove on, and passed a signpost, pointing to Netheravon, and remembered it was that village. Then did not turn off, so failed to see S. Smith's church. Must do so the next time.'

From James Lees-Milne, *Through Wood and Dale* (1998): an entry from his diary for October 1976.

## Well Done!

Congratulations to a printer of feeling in the United States: Saturn Press (Post Office Box 368, Swan's Island, Maine 04685) have published - under a series title 'well said!' - the attractive blue birthday card we reproduce on the outside back cover. 'Antique letterpress printing; typeset by hand. Recycled paper' the Press proclaim with proper pride. The 'art' is by Fritz Hellmut Ehmecke, 1907.

Readers receiving any quotes from Sydney along with their wished-for Happy Returns - or finding his wisdom on biscuit tins, tea caddies, lemon squeezers - are asked to tell the Editor.

## Duncan? Let's hear it not!

As members were preparing themselves for the journey to the Combe Florey weekend, several no doubt from Paddington ('I am quite delighted with the Rail Road...traveled in 6 hours 150 miles with as little fatigue as if I had been sitting down in my own Elbow Chair in my own Library' - Sydney, December 1842), *The Times* for 28 September 2001 published Philip Howard's painstaking calculation that there are: '333 Smiths in the current *Who's Who*, omitting Smythes, Smithsons and other renegades'. He had to count them all for his typically refreshing slant on the election of the new Tory leader in his article headed: 'If you want to be noticed Iain, drop the Duncan and keep the Smith'. In closing he had this advice for the lucky winner: 'But the Smith whom you should take as your model is Sydney Smith. He was the wise wit who made Queen Victoria laugh until she cried. He was an intellectual with the common touch. He believed in freedom for all, even aliens, Europhiles and asylum-seekers. He coined "A square peg in a round hole". When urged by his doctor to take a daily walk on an empty stomach, he asked "Whose?" He was a sparkling stream of sense and nonsense. He made the glorious assertion: "I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so." If you can be half the Smith he was, you will still not be premier. But you will make us happier than most Prime Ministers.'

We asked Philip how he got to know Sydney: 'I first met the Smith of Smiths through having to translate him into Ciceronian prose aged 14. In his own words: "When wit is combined with sense and information, when it is softened by benevolence and restrained by principle, when it is in the hands of a man who loves humour, justice, decency, good nature, morality and religion, wit is then a beautiful and delightful part of our nature. Man could direct his ways by plain reason and support his life by tasteless food: but God has given us wit and flavour and brightness and laughter and perfume, to enliven the days of man's pilgrimage and to charm his pained steps over the burning marle."'

Good fortune for Philip Howard to have met these words so young: and so clearly to have benefited from them in later life. 'Great man', he adds. And Queen Victoria was amused after all....



## An invitation to poesy

Thanks to the poet's ready agreement, we are pleased to extend 'An Invitation to Breakfast from Sydney Smith' in the shape of this engaging poem by Matt Simpson, from his collection *Getting There* published by Liverpool University Press in 2001:

Muffins and metaphysics,  
contradictions and crumpets,  
will you come?

I want to recommend  
the latest Mrs Crowe,  
despite improbabilities,  
her much-too-complicated plot

(boy climbs aboard a frigate  
in the dead of night,  
penetrates, unchallenged, to  
the captain's cabin;  
the heroine climbs through  
a second-storey window  
to bring off a rescue  
of two grenadiers; a man  
about to be murdered is saved  
by rescuing a woman about  
to be drowned). I must admit

there is excitement, pace,  
and on the whole I think it good.

Then I wish to advert you to  
a book I saw whose title is  
*Hasty Thoughts on Pickles*,  
which I suspect is Georgiana's hand.

Or you might perhaps enlighten me  
about the Scottish Church.  
Something to do with oatmeal I  
believe.

And now that you ask,  
I've gout, asthma  
and seven other maladies  
(we could bemoan our growing old!)  
but otherwise I'm well enough.

Digestion is the secret.

Come round one morning soon  
and share with me.

Is this, ponders a member, the first poem about Sydney? Readers are invited to contradict this conjecture by submitting any earlier compositions they may have discovered. Better still, to send us something of their own written in 2002. Themes abound. Would our *English Bards* care to celebrate the bicentenary this October of the first appearance of the *Edinburgh Review* – for subsequent savaging by our *Scotch Reviewers*?

## Stop Press

The timely discovery of an aging photostat of fifty years ago allows us to stimulate our poetasters with this *jeu d'esprit* by Christopher Morley (1890-1957), convivial and archetypal bookman and man of letters. It was published in the *Spectator* for 21 November 1952:

### 150th Anniversary of the Edinburgh Review

*The Edinburgh Review*  
Was founded in 1802.  
In every college seminar  
Its best-known words still are  
*This will never do.*  
The truth (as students say, no kid)  
Is, it never did.

Except the author, what men love most  
Is a real ribroast,  
A barbecue.

*The Edinburgh* was full of spine,  
And it went down the drain lang syne,  
But even old and tired and shabby  
I'll probably re-read *Tintern Abbey*.

By happy chance a daughter of Christopher Morley's lives in Edinburgh, and she was glad to learn of her father's sonnet and to approve of our printing it here.

### Far from commonplace

The first card - the first *present* - to arrive each December is John Julius Norwich's *Christmas Cracker*: an unfailing delight. And in his 2001 number, no fewer than four quotes from Sydney's letters, among them: 'We now have another bed, in which a maid or a philosopher, or a maid with a philosopher, might be put. God grant that in this latter event they might both merit their respective appellations the ensuing morning.' That's splendid - so we asked John Julius how frequent a contributor to his Commonplace Books Sydney has been: 'I remember reading Hesketh Pearson an con or two ago; apart from that - which I have anyway forgotten - I know relatively little about him. All my favourite quotes have now appeared in the Crackers (I have just checked this up: there are no more quotations in any of my ten Commonplace Books). Whether he kept a collection himself I have no idea; somehow I doubt it. He was obviously well read, but all his humour



was I am sure improvised: like Peter Cook or, more recently, Eddie Izzard, he had that strange gift of seeing things from an unusual angle, and of making free associations to achieve those marvellous similes and metaphors. More than that I honestly cannot say.'

How many members, we wonder, keep commonplace books – and for how many more is the thought just a good and admirable intention? If you *do* keep one, let us know – and specify your favourite Sydney quotes. Another of John Julius's this time is: 'Pray tell the said John Murray that three ladies, apparently pregnant and much agitated, have been here to inquire his direction, calling him a base, perfidious young man....' Clearly active in several directions was Sir John Archibald Murray, not to be confused with John Murray, bookseller ('When *Childe Harold* was published, Byron woke up to find himself famous and his publisher, John Murray, woke up a gentleman'), who launched the *Quarterly Review* in 1809 as a counterblast to the whig *Edinburgh Review*. That was John Murray II: the sixth John Murray (Jock) joined the firm in Albemarle Street in the 1930s and was a genial, idiosyncratic and truly well-loved publisher. He himself loved letters in every sense and was a devoted keeper of a commonplace book of which his son John VII published a handsome selection in 1995. Jock has two Sydney quotes, one the unsurprising 'I never read a book...', the other 'On seeing two women shouting to each other across a road from their doorsteps, Sydney Smith remarked to his companion: "A fine example of people arguing from two different premises."'.

The brilliant list of authors nurtured by the family firm in Albemarle Street includes our much missed member Rupert Hart-Davis. Selections from Rupert's commonplace book, *A Beggar in Purple* (Hamish Hamilton, *not* Murray, 1983), include five from Sydney, the book's penultimate entry being: 'One evil in old age is that as your time has come you think every little illness is the beginning of the end. When a man expects to be arrested, every knock at the door is an alarm.' But as Rupert's *envoi* (he died in 1999 aged 92), let us quote from the first of the six volumes of the immensely re-readable *Lyttelton Hart-Davis Letters* which Jock Murray published between 1978 and 1984:

'Anticipations of heaven (even Sydney Smith's "eating *pâtés de foie gras* to the sound of trumpets") always seem to me almost as forbidding as foretastes of Judgment. I'm all for a good sleep, than which few things are more consistently enjoyable. R.I.P. seems to me the nicest wish one can make for anyone.'

