

### 390 SMITH, MICHAEL

**Publisher**

**Richmond**

Publisher of two books dealing with the War of 1812, one in 1814 from the Richmond press of Samuel Pleasants (331) and a second in 1815 from that of Arthur G. Booker (041).

Smith was an itinerant Baptist minister who published accounts of his life and trials in Upper Canada (today the province of Ontario) in Richmond during the War of 1812. Those imprints are part of a series of such publications from 1813 to 1817. The last in that series was the lengthiest edition of an autobiography that presents a detailed report of the publishing history all of the books Smith published before 1818.

Born in Pennsylvania in the earliest days of the Revolutionary War, Smith was educated in Philadelphia after its conclusion. At sixteen, he was sent to Culpeper County, Virginia, to live with an uncle and work on his farm. In his four years in Virginia then, Smith was exposed to the Baptist faith and became an itinerant preacher. In 1796, he returned to Pennsylvania but quickly found his options limited there; so he began a ten-year-long peregrination of the western and southern territories, apparently preaching for his sustenance as he went. Smith married an unnamed woman "in one of the southern states" in 1806, instigating a return to Pennsylvania as he did not want to raise a family in the slaveholding South. However, he was unable to find either land or a stable pulpit in Pennsylvania to support his family.

#### **On to Canada**

So Smith turned to Upper Canada, where many Americans had taken 200-acre land grants from the British colonial government in their effort to populate the Niagara frontier. In 1807, he bought one of those tracts from its original grantee, so avoiding the requirement that grantees pledge their loyalty to the British crown, a tactic that would eventually force Smith from his farm; he moved his wife and two infant sons there in 1808. Located on the northern shore of Lake Erie, west of the Niagara River and south of the Falls, his farm was in the center of similar American migrations to Canada; he did some preaching in the area, but was best known by 1810 as a schoolmaster in nearby Niagara-on-the-Lake (i.e. Lake Ontario, at the outlet of the Niagara River). That role brought him to the attention of the Lieutenant Governor, Francis Gore; that summer he asked Gore for permission to compile and publish "a Geographical and Political view of the province of Upper Canada," which Gore granted.

However, events would disrupt Smith's publishing plans after he spent a year travelling the province collecting information. In the summer of 1811, he was asked to edit the weekly *Upper Canada Guardian or Freeman's Journal*; the paper was published at Niagara-on-the-Lake by a member of the provincial legislature, one Joseph Willcocks; he was an Irish émigré who had fled his homeland during the United Irishmen troubles of the 1790s because of his loyalty to the crown, unlike his dissident contemporaries who fled to the United States; his paper became a voice for the transplanted Americans in the region, like Smith, who found themselves at the mercy of colonial land policies that favored Anglo-Scottish settlers over American ones. Smith also made a considerable investment in the troubled journal with borrowed monies as part of the deal, which led to financial disaster when the War of 1812

erupted a year later. Smith defaulted on his loans when Willcocks, the senior partner, shut the paper in July 1812, claiming the move was simply a suspension until new tools could be acquired; but he died two years later at the head of his militia unit in a battle before Fort Erie, the Canadian fort opposite Buffalo, never to publish again.

Shortly after the closure, Smith was confronted with his status as an American emigrant. He was one of many such settlers who declined to affirm their loyalty when asked in August 1812. At first, his action did not seem to be a problem as Smith was excused from military service on account of his ministerial profession and his then ill-health. But over that fall, Smith, his family, and his farm were harassed continually by transient Mohawks allied to the British army as they moved between the war front and their northern Ontario reservation; they challenged him as an enemy combatant in their midst. Then in November, the settlers who had declined the oath were ordered to swear loyalty on pain of either imprisonment as spies or expulsion from Canada entirely as undesirables. Smith and his family chose to leave voluntarily, applying for a passport to leave the province in December at Kingston; but they were held under house arrest there as the commission issuing such passports investigated whether Smith's earlier geographic research constituted espionage, as some neighbors charged. Eventually, the family was given passports and transported to Prescott on the St. Lawrence River for a crossing of the river to Ogdensburg in upstate New York.

### **From Vermont to Virginia**

Back in the United States, the destitute Smith family found charity offered by their Baptist brethren, which they reluctantly accepted. Their initial benefactor was a Baptist deacon and militia commander named Osgood who provided a vacant house and barn as shelter from the winter season. There Smith began a routine that eventually carried the family south to Virginia – preaching for the funds he needed to move his family further on. At first, he sought a simple return to his Pennsylvania family roots, and so travelled east to Plattsburg to cross Lake Champlain, then passing south through a series of Vermont villages, arriving in Poughkeepsie in late March 1813, preaching for up to a week at each stop along the way.

His travels brought Smith into contact with many people intrigued by his familiarity with the Niagara frontier and the war still ongoing there. As he still retained most of the manuscript he had prepared before the war, many suggested that he publish it with an addendum detailing his ill-treatment at the hands of the colonial government and their native allies. Convinced that doing so would profit his impoverished family, Smith left Poughkeepsie for Hartford, Connecticut, where he was told receptive printer-publishers could be engaged. On arriving there in mid-April, he found such in the firm of Hale & Hosmer (Horatio G. Hale and Charles Hosmer), publishers of the *Connecticut Mirror*. That spring, they issued two distinct print runs of Smith's *A Geographical View of the Province of Upper Canada and Promiscuous Remarks on the Government*, the first of 3000 copies, then a second of 10,000; still the imprint record does not note the distinction, even as it notes variant title-pages for the two runs. These were the first issues of a work that was popular for the next decade.

His success in Hartford meant that Smith was pressed to produce more copies of the book. He soon encountered another Baptist preacher who offered to finance publication of a true

second edition of his *Geographic View* in 3000 copies if Smith would allow him to take the first 700 copies in exchange; the author promptly agreed and the pair engaged the New York press of Pelsue & Gould (William L. Pelsue and Stephen Gould) to print the second edition. Smith took his share in unbound sheets to nearby Newark to have them bound, apparently at a rate cheaper than that in New York City, and then travelled around New Jersey preaching and selling his books. When he arrived in Trenton in October, he had an enlarged and revised version of the text ready for the press, only now he embraced a new tactic – that of selling the copyright to a single publisher in each state. He sold the rights for New Jersey to the Trenton booksellers Moore & Lake (John C. Moore and James Lake), who published a copy of that third edition. In November, Smith sold the rights for Pennsylvania and Maryland to the Philadelphia booksellers Thomas and Robert Desilver, who employed the press of John Bioren to publish their version of Smith's third edition. Smith took his copies of the new edition to Virginia, preaching in Louisa County at the invitation of fellow Baptists while disposing of his stock of books.

### **Richmond**

In December 1813, a year after their forced departure from Canada, Smith and his family landed in Richmond, drawn to Virginia by his earlier Culpeper associations. Once again, he preached widely in central Virginia while making significant revisions to his *Geographic View* that winter. Smith added a history of the War of 1812 to the original text, while separating his brief narrative of the family's flight into a new work. His enlarged *A Geographical View of the British Possessions in North America* was published in Baltimore in May 1814, a choice dictated by the lack of paper in Richmond to complete the project; Smith made a brief sojourn to supervise the project, leaving his family with friends in Caroline County.

But by fall 1814, the entire new project had brought him little reward; the militia call-ups of that summer – in response to the British incursions into the Chesapeake – brought to a halt the distribution of finished books to his subscribers; his unnamed binder/bookseller refused to sell any books until all 2500 subscriber copies had been delivered, which was not until early 1815 when the militia units were recalled. When asked to pay the bindery charges, even as his books sat unclaimed and unsold, Smith was forced to exchange unbound sheets as payment, leading him to claim that he made no profit from this particular publication. To add insult to injury, unbound sheets of the work that he had entrusted to a friend in Washington were lost when the British burned the capital in late August.

Needing to make up for the income lost, and so sustain his family over the coming winter, Smith now pressed to complete the autobiographical narrative of his escape from Canada, which was not dependent on advance subscriptions. That work – with the cumbersome title of *Human Sorrow and Divine Comfort, or A Short Narrative of the Sufferings, Travel, Present Feelings and Situation of M. Smith, preacher of the Gospel* – issued from the press of Samuel Pleasants shortly before that publisher's death in October. Many of the 1800 copies he produced were distributed by Baptist ministers among the state's various militia camps in an apparent attempt to aide their brother minister.

Over the ensuing winter, Smith followed developments in the war with a view to printing an addendum to his most recent edition of the *Geographical View* once the war ended; the task was completed in April 1815 when *A Continuation of the History of the War* issued from the new Richmond press office of Arthur G. Booker, formerly a journeyman in the Pleasants office now on his own with most of his former master's printing office. It was his last Richmond publication. For the rest of 1815, Smith travelled and preached in the Southside and throughout the Virginia piedmont, spending one memorable night with the Madisons (James and Dolley) at Montpelier in Orange County. That ministerial tour brought him an invitation to move to Kentucky to minister to the growing number of Baptist congregations there; he did not long ponder the offer before accepting.

### **To Kentucky and Beyond**

In late 1815, Smith and his family set out for Kentucky, though delays in settling his affairs in Richmond forced them to winter-over in Abingdon rather than cross the Appalachians in that inclement season. They arrived in Lexington in March 1816, with Smith conducting an extensive preaching tour of Kentucky from there until the late fall. He spent the winter of 1816-17 teaching a school supported by the state's Bible Society and compiling a new work of religious songs, what he termed "my hymnal." That work, *Beauties of Divine Poetry, or Appropriate Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, issued from the Lexington press of William Worsley (462), a Virginian who had labored long in Richmond's printing establishments. Later that year, Smith claimed it was the most popular book that he ever published, but the numbers of his *Geographic View* that were issued before that 1817 work was completed suggest that the claim reflected more his view of his ministry than it did market realities.

That same year, Worsley also produced an extended edition of Smith's autobiographical account of the family's 1812 flight from the war; now called *A Narrative of the Sufferings in Upper Canada, with his family in the late war, and journey to Virginia and Kentucky*, this was his final and definitive statement on the subject. Thereafter, Smith was only interested in religious publications, not biographical ones; in that last edition, he noted that he was then gathering material for a history of the revivals that had spread through the American west between 1807 and 1817; but that publication never appeared, suggesting that it was never finished. It is also likely that, with the war's end, any interest in Smith's ideas and exploits quickly faded as his work competed with that of other, abler religious controversialists.

After 1817, Smith's ministry and travels become uncertain, as the record of his publications nearly ceases, and his activities as a Baptist preacher went unrecorded in that faith's state-oriented histories. In 1822, Smith was apparently in or near Charleston, South Carolina, as he issued his last imprint there that year: a juvenile biblical history *The History of Daniel, the Prophet* published by booksellers Thayer & Bason there. Then in April 1828, he reappeared in Milledgeville, Georgia, proposing a new weekly paper there in support of the embattled administration of John Quincy Adams; *The Olive Branch* apparently was never issued as no record of its publication has been found. And with that void, all trace of Smith and his family in the historic, bibliographic, and genealogical record comes to an inconclusive end.

***Personal Data***

Born: In 1776 Chester County, Pennsylvania.  
Married: in 1806 Unnamed wife "in one of the southern states."  
Died: After 1828 Possibly in Georgia.  
Children: At least two sons; eldest was named Milton Paradise (b. ca. 1808).

Sources: Imprints, esp. his *Narrative of the Sufferings* (1817); entries for Smith and Willcocks in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*; notice in [Charleston SC] *Courier* (1828).