

A Wit and His Gout: The Reverend Sydney Smith

By STANLEY L. WALLACE

IN OUR TIME, Sydney Smith (1771–1845) is perhaps best known as a wit (figs. 1 and 2). Some of his jests have already reached the medical literature.^{1,2} He divided humanity into three sexes—men, women and clergymen. He described heaven as eating *paté de foie gras* to the sound of trumpets. He did not relish the country; “it was a sort of healthy grave.”³ He said there were no amusements in England save vice and religion.⁴ He claimed never to read a book before reviewing it; “it prejudices a man so.”⁵

But Smith was more than a jester. He was among the first to realize that one could best quicken a man’s intelligence by tickling his sense of humor; by making his countrymen laugh, he made them think. He mixed wit and morality in the service of reform. Smith fought hard and whole-heartedly for the great causes of his period—Catholic emancipation, Parliamentary reform, prison reform, for changes in game laws, against slavery. He spent his life attacking in print and in sermons, wittily and effectively, the bigotry and inhumanity of the politicians, the clergy, the aristocracy—the ruling classes of his day.⁶ Yet he was never utopian or radical, never given to large generalizations. He always attacked a particular abuse and proposed appropriate and specific remedies.⁷

Smith helped found *The Edinburgh Review* in 1802, edited the first issue, and contributed reviews and articles for more than twenty-five years.⁸ W. H. Auden placed Sydney Smith in the first rank as a polemical writer, along with Jonathan Swift and George Bernard Shaw.^{9,10}

In addition to Smith’s brilliant sermons, pamphlets, articles, reviews, he was a master letter-writer. He made frequent mention of his gout in his letters. From these letters the reader can obtain a picture of the medical and lay knowledge of gout in England in the period from 1830 through 1845, depicted with Smith’s charm and good humor.

Smith had had some medical training. He studied medicine and anatomy in his spare time at Oxford.¹¹ He took further courses in medicine at Edinburgh, and indeed acted as a physician to his own family and to some of his parishioners, especially the poor.¹²

He apparently suffered his first attack of gout in an ankle, toward the end of 1829. “My attack was slight, but well for a beginning; it was of the gout family, but hardly gout itself.”¹³ At about that time, he wrote to Lady Morley, “I am sincerely sorry to hear of the sufferings of Lord Morley; at the same time my opinion always was that the gout, entering upon a peer of the realm, had too good a thing of it to be easily dispossessed.”¹⁴ About another friend, he quipped “H. R. with the gout? I should have thought rheumatism good enough

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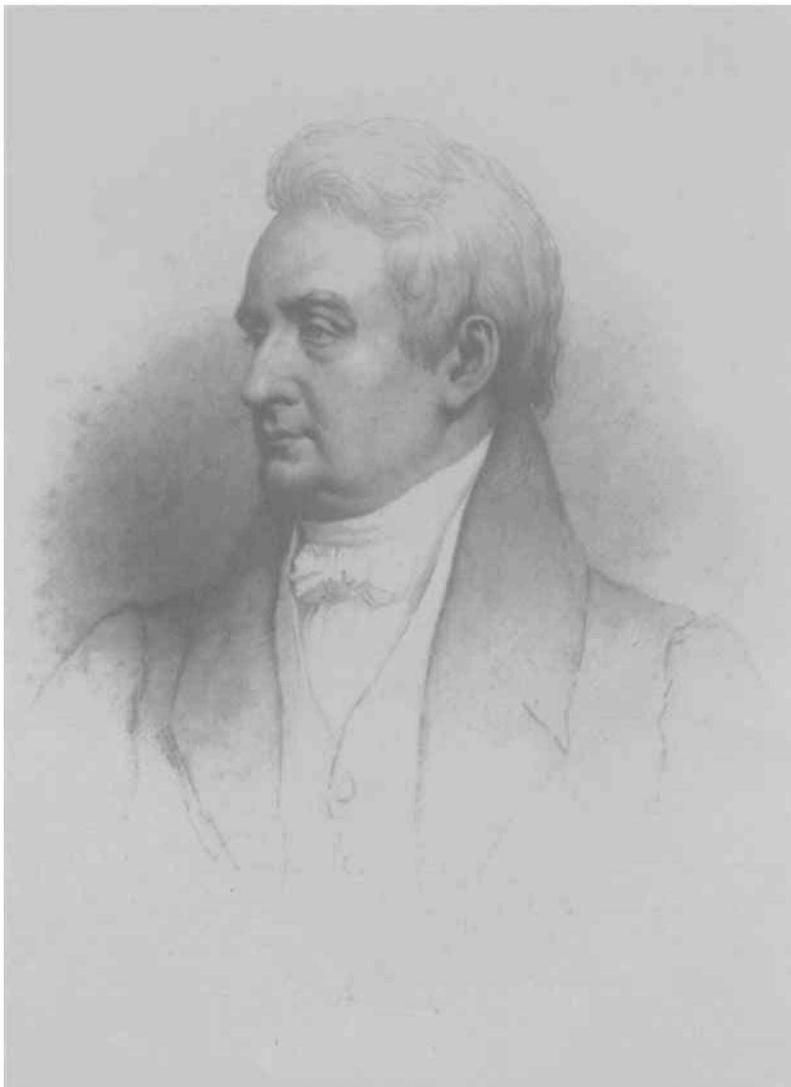


Fig. 1.—Reverend Sydney Smith, from an engraving by Sartain. Reprinted by permission of the New York Public Library.

for him.”¹⁵ He described gout as “that toe-consuming tyrant.”¹⁶ In July of 1834, he wrote “I am making a slow recovery; hardly yet able to put on a christian shoe. On Monday I shall have been ill for a month.—We enter and quit the world in pain! But let us be just, however; I find my eyesight much improved by the gout, and I am not low spirited.”¹⁷ It is clear that any therapy he might have been taking at this time was ineffective.

The only significant advance in English medicine in the study and treatment of gout between Sydenham’s superb clinical description in 1683 and Garrod’s initial metabolic investigations in 1848 was the introduction in 1810 of Hus-



Fig. 2.—This caricature of Sydney Smith by Maclise (reprinted by permission of Chapman, Hall, Ltd.) shows that he was not universally beloved. Lord Byron, no friend of Whigs and reformers, described Smith as “Smug Sidney,”⁴⁴ and in his poem *Don Juan* called him “the loudest wit I e’er was deafened with”; “his jokes were sermons and his sermons jokes.”⁴⁵

son's Eau Medicinale, a proprietary and secret medicine.¹⁸ Want, in 1814, analyzed Eau Medicinale and proved it to be an extract of the plant *Colchicum autumnale*.^{19,20} The recognized use of extracts of colchicum dates from this report. Nevertheless, Wilson²¹ in 1817, Johnson²² in 1819, Rennie,²³ who himself had gout, in 1825, and even Gairdner²⁴ as late as 1851 argued that although colchicum was helpful in acute gout, its use was contraindicated because it aggravated the underlying disease and increased the frequency of attacks. Halford in 1833 however endorsed colchicum strongly.²⁵

Sydney Smith's first mention of colchicum was in December, 1834. In a letter in January, 1835, he wrote: "I had last week the gout upon crutches, and it came into my eye, but by means of colchicum I can now see and walk."²⁶ (Presumably he had a gouty uveitis as well.) In December 1838: "On Sunday I was on crutches utterly unable to put foot on the ground, on Tuesday I walked 4 miles such is the power of Colchicum."²⁷ He remained strongly impressed with the beneficial effects colchicum had on his gout and made numerous other references to it in his letters. "I have continued pretty well since I took Colchicum. I respect Hammick, but his opinion differs entirely from that of Halford, Holland, Warren, and Chambers [physicians of the period], all of whom I have consulted—and who are *unanimous for Colchicum*. I suspect Vance has brought Colchicum into discredit by giving 3 times the quantity that is prescribed by either of these practitioners; he gives in 24 hours 180 drops, to their 60."²⁸ The vinous extract of the corm was no doubt in use.

Smith retold the following anecdote, most likely about the physician Warren, mentioned above: "W— left behind him £ 100,000, with the following account how he had acquired it by different diseases:—'Aurum catharticum £ 20,000; aurum diureticum £ 10,000; aurum podagrosium £ 30,000; aurum apoplecticum £ 20,000; aurum senile et nervorum £ 10,000.' But for the truth of this anecdote I vouch not."²⁹ If true, gout was the most remunerative of diseases in that period.

Smith was aware of the influence of diet and emotion on the production of attacks of gout. "What a very singular disease gout is! It seems as if the stomach fell down into the feet. The smallest deviation from the right diet is immediately punished by limping and lameness, and the innocent ankle and blameless instep are tortured for the vices of the nobler organs. The stomach having found this easy way of getting rid of inconveniences, becomes cruelly despotic, and punishes for the least offences. A plum, a glass of champagne, excess in joy, excess in grief—any crime, however small, is sufficient for redness, swelling, spasms and large shoes."³⁰ Again, "I have no gout nor any symptom of it; by eating little, and drinking only water, I keep body and mind in a serene state, and spare the great toe."³¹ "I ought to have the gout, having been free in the use of French wines; and as Nature is never slow about paying these sort of debts, I suppose I shall have it."³² And finally, in a vein similar to Franklin's celebrated dialogue with the gout, "What an admirable provision of Providence is the gout! What prevents human beings from making the body a larder or a cellar, but the gout? When I feel a pang, I say 'I know what this is for. I know what you mean. I understand the hint!' and so I endeavor to extract a little wisdom from pain."³³

Smith knew about heredity and sex preponderance in gout. His father, older son, and one brother also had had the disease. He wrote: "I observe that gout loves ancestors and genealogy. It needs five or six generations of gentlemen or noblemen to give it its full vigor."³⁴ In a letter to Lady Lister, who had gout herself: "I thought it was a bargain of nature to the two sexes that gentlemen should have the gout and ladies produce the children. I do not see the smallest symptoms of exchange in Lister."³⁵

In 1841 he apparently had many attacks of gout. "The devil has left me, dear Mrs. Grote, and I can walk. I am as proud of the privilege of walking as Mr. Grote would be of a peerage."³⁶ "The gout is never far off though not actually present.—It is the only enemy that I do not wish to have at my feet."³⁷

Sydney Smith had other diseases as well as the gout, including hay fever, asthma (cardiac asthma[?]), and the heart disease and congestive failure from which he ultimately died. On sickness in general he wrote: "One evil in old age is that as your time is come, you think every little illness is the beginning of the end. When a man expects to be arrested, every knock on the door is an alarm."³⁸ "Mrs. Sydney has eight distinct illnesses, and I have nine. We take something every hour and pass the mixture from one to the other."³⁹ About four months before he died, he noted: "My breathlessness and giddiness are gone—chased away by the gout. If you hear of sixteen or eighteen pounds of human flesh, they belong to me. I look as if a curate had been taken out of me."⁴⁰ He may have diuresed with an attack of gout.

In a letter to his son-in-law, who was also his physician, he inveighed against hay fever: "Turn your mind to this little curse. If consumption is too powerful for physicians, at least they should not suffer themselves to be outwitted by such little upstart disorders as the hay fever."⁴¹

Even on his deathbed, he remained his inimitable self. When his nurse jokingly said that he might have taken a dose of ink by mistake in place of medicine, he replied, "Then bring me all the blotting paper there is in the house."⁴²

The editor of his letters described Smith as "a blend of candour, practical sagacity and kindness, wit and irresistible nonsense."⁴³ His writings on his gout reflect his warmth, wisdom and humor exceedingly well.

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