



W. B. Smith

Titan vs. Taboo

Warren Browne's Life of William Benjamin Smith

Book Review by Harry Rubey

Unfortunately no institution can boast of many scholars of really outstanding ability for great intellects are and always have been relatively rare. Our own university has a number of such to its credit. William Benjamin Smith, in particular (1850-1934), is a shining example, if the attention given to his published works in many subjects, the comments of his colleagues and reports from his students are competent criteria. He taught physics and mathematics at the University of Missouri from 1885 to 1893, before joining the faculty at Tulane University, where he went on to win renown in many fields, especially in mathematics and Biblical criticism. The University of Missouri awarded him an honorary degree of LL. D., in 1931.

Smith is receiving attention at this time because an interesting biography of this great scholar has recently been published* entitled *Titan vs. Taboo: The Life of William Benjamin Smith*. The author is Warren Browne, a former student, 1912-1915. While attending the University of Missouri, Mr. Browne was Business Manager of the 1915 *Savitar* and won his letter in track as a pole-vaulter. He has had a varied career as an athletic coach, investment banker and Professor of Finance at Northwestern University, from where he was retired recently with Emeritus rank.

The book presents an easy-reading word picture of Smith's remarkable career. It is a story of a precocious child of indomitable disposition, soaring ambition, a photographic memory and an inventive imagination. From his paternal grandfather, who wrung a sizable fortune from the Kentucky wilderness at the beginning of the nineteenth century, farming and trading in land, cattle and slaves, he apparently inherited his strong-willed, determined nature; and from his father, a lawyer-turned-farmer, who was known as the "walking encyclopedia," he received his incredible intellect.

Mr. Browne has done a massive research on the life activities of the late mathematician, philosopher, poet, linguist, and Biblical critic of Missouri and Tulane Universities; his story reveals that Smith's scholarly

achievements have merited praise from highly-competent judges which can be adequately described only as fantastic. Here are some samples among many:

From the *Town and Country Review*, London:

In the intellect of William Benjamin Smith, America seems to have produced the nearest approach to the universal mind since the other hemisphere was illumined by that mental meteor Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

From the late Cassius Jackson Keyser, Adrain Professor Emeritus of mathematics, Columbia University:

Of William Benjamin Smith it may, I think, be said, without extravagance, that our country has had no greater scholar, no profounder or more productive investigator, no more versatile genius, and none more completely devoted to the higher interests of the human spirit.

Eulogistic editorial in the New Orleans *States* at the time of Smith's death:

His was one of the most remarkable minds that has ever shed its brilliance in this world—many-sided as a diamond. He was a colossal mathematician, an erudite philosopher, a deep Greek scholar, and a poet of astonishing richness. . . . His knowledge was world-wide in scope, his mind as keen for modern discovery and speculation as for ancient lore.

Smith grew up on a farm in northwestern Missouri near St. Joseph. He learned his three R's plus Latin in a private school where the one instructor was so busy with excess enrollment that Smith literally taught himself. But he did so well that when he took the entrance examinations in 1867 at Kentucky University, which later became the University of Kentucky, he received advanced standing in every subject. Three years later he graduated with highest honors.

An appointment to the faculty followed immediately and permitted Smith to continue his own studies, culminating in a Master's degree in 1871, and carrying a citation "for special proficiency in German, Italian and Hebrew." By this time he was already well-grounded in Latin and Greek, and later became skilled in Sanskrit. He continued as a teacher and during the next three years built up an enviable reputation. He next taught mathematics and Latin for two years (1874-76) at St. John's College, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, and then decided to obtain

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his Ph.D. degree abroad. After careful consideration of various German universities he chose Göttingen, and three years later in 1879, he received the degree, again with highest honors.

On his return to the States his first important teaching experience was as Professor of Mathematics at General College, Fayette, Mo. In 1885, he moved to the University of Missouri. During this period he wrote several mathematical texts which established his reputation as a competent mathematician. He also gave attention to the subject of Biblical writings and wrote and published a number of articles in the *Unitarian Review* of Boston. During his time at Missouri, he wrote a biography of James Sidney Rollins (Father of the University of Missouri) and further to show his intellectual versatility he produced an article on the subject of the Protective Tariff which received praise from high places. At this period he participated in some of the University's administrative problems which earned him both enemies and many devoted friends. The cleavages resulting from these issues were the cause of him casting his lot with Tulane University in 1893.

At Tulane he became more and more interested in the study of Christian scriptural literature and his writings in that field soon earned him a deserved reputation as a Biblical critic. In this capacity he spoke before the Congress of Arts and Science, Section of the New Testament, at the Louisiana Exposition in St. Louis, in September 1904. In the audience sat the distinguished Liberal theologian, Dr. Otto Pfleiderer, of the University of Berlin. He was astounded over Dr. Smith's declarations and not only urged him to carry on his investigations but promised to aid him in finding a German publisher; thus it was that his views were incorporated in the German language and printed in Germany under the title of *Der vorchristliche Jesus* (The Pre-Christian Jesus).

The publication of this book not only created a tremendous furore in German Biblico-critical circles but established Dr. Smith as a scholar of phenomenal magnitude. When President Jesse went abroad in 1907, he was besieged by European scholars for information about the great scholar, "The American," William Benjamin Smith. Other scholarly laurels at this period of his life were commissions for articles on New Testament Problems, and the Infinitesimal Calculus, from the *Encyclopedia Americana*; still later they engaged him to write a comprehensive series on the Bible. These he accomplished in such a manner that they stood the test of inclusion in that compendium of human knowledge for more than three decades. Also about the same time he wrote the mathematical definitions for Webster's *New International Dictionary*, another colossal scholarly achievement.

Still later (1911), he amplified his views on the origins of Christianity in another German-printed book bearing the title of *Ecce Deus* (Behold God). This work was subsequently translated into English and ran to two editions.

Many other achievements added to Dr. Smith's stature. He won a national poetry competition in 1906; in 1908, he was signally honored by President Theodore Roosevelt by an appointment as one of ten delegates to represent the United States at the Pan-American Scientific Congress, held at Santiago, Chile; and his published translation of Homer's *Iliad* from the difficult dactylic hexameter of the Greek into a homometrical line for line English version is hailed as a marvelous achievement by Greek language specialists.

Dr. Smith was the antithesis of a materialist; he believed implicitly in a spiritual universe. To him there was a definite purpose in the universe around us and he would unhesitatingly defend such a view against any and all materialistic arguments. In fact, his entire philosophy was a version of Berkeleyan Idealism, the view that so-called material things exist only in being perceived.

As he grew older Dr. Smith became more and more a philosopher and this caused him to transfer from the Chair of Mathematics at Tulane to that of Philosophy in 1907. When the change was made the enrollment in the Department of Philosophy increased fifteen hundred percent, as not only students but faculty members as well flocked into his courses to listen to his gifted expositions of the fundamental verities. And when he retired, the enrollment dropped back to its former levels in spite of an excellent successor.

William Benjamin Smith retired Emeritus at 65 in 1915, and continued to live in New Orleans, but, when his oldest son died in 1924, he returned to Columbia in order to be near his son's widow and his granddaughter who lived at Fayette. He resided in Columbia until his death on August 6, 1934.

Dr. Smith entered the arena in many of the controversial issues of his day but, since no one has successfully argued against or disproved his scholarly and objective contentions that often ran contrary to the taboos of his generation, and since he made no attempt to present them popularly, his name has been allowed to fade away. The author of *Titan vs. Taboo* is to be commended for excellently and attractively re-creating and reporting the essential features of the life of William Benjamin Smith; the reader of the book should find inspiration and pleasure in following the career of a great scholar whose work covered so many facets of widely varying fields. Scholars, students and librarians will appreciate the thorough footnotes and index as well as the extensive bibliographies covering the fields of Dr. Smith's writings and interests.

This reviewer was privileged to know Dr. Smith intimately during the last decade of his life and found him, as did his many friends, to be an interesting, amiable and entirely admirable character as well as a gentleman and scholar of the old school in the finest interpretation of that somewhat outmoded cliché. He retained his keen interest and intellect to the end.