


1980 - 1989


125. “Periodic Table”, in Academic American Encyclopedia, Areté, Princeton, NJ, 1980, Vol. 15, pp. 166-169; and a number of short biographical notes scattered throughout the various volumes.


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SOME EDGAR FAHS SMITH MEMORABILIA

William D. Williams, Harding University

Edgar Faas Smith is recognized as the Dean of American chemical historians. His papers and books have inspired many of us to study early chemistry. His influence in establishing the Division of the History of Chemistry of the American Chemical Society has promoted research in that field and his wonderful collection of early chemical books, portraits and memorabilia, still housed at the University of Pennsylvania, has preserved for all of us a tangible and irreplaceable link with our professional past.

I certainly cut my history-of-chemistry teeth on Smith’s works and have tried to emulate his writing and collecting. In this process, I became a close friend of Wyndham Miles, another chemical historian and “old chemistry” collector. Dr. Miles has spent 40 years supplementing Smith’s work on early American chemistry. Over the years he has accumulated a large rare chemistry collection, including some interesting Smith memorabilia. As a regular visitor to the Smith Collection, Miles became well known to Eva Armstrong and Robert Sutton, who were its curators. In the 1950s, when the Smith
Collection was discarding some duplicate volumes and some of E. F. Smith's non-chemistry books. Miles obtained them for his collection. When Miles retired in 1984, he placed his collection and research files at Harding University, to be combined with mine.

So here I am, searching through third and fourth-hand material for fragments that contain insights into the character of Edgar F. Smith. Just as I enjoyed reading the recent story about the Smith statue on the University of Pennsylvania campus (1), perhaps you will be interested in some of this memorabilia. Join me and let's see what we can find!

The first item to come to hand is a presentation copy of Smith's *Old Chemistries*, with the inscription: "To Dr. Tenney L. Davis, whose love for ancient chemical literature endears him to thousands of chemistry students - from one of them, The Author." Davis was, of course, another of the founders of the Division of the History of Chemistry and also an avid student of early American chemistry.

In another copy of the same book, we find a letter from Smith which traces its surprising bibliographic success:

University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia
Edgar F. Smith

January thirtieth 1928

Dear Mr. Marshall:

I have your letter of January 28th. I am exceedingly sorry but it is impossible to get a copy of my little book entitled "Chemistry in Old Philadelphia." The edition was 500, I think. The book disappeared rapidly. I handled it myself, as the publishers evidently did not think that it would sell very well. They seemed surprised when it was taken up so rapidly.

Do you happen to have another volume of mine entitled "Chemistry in America?" There is undoubtedly a copy of that in the library in Baltimore.

Yours sincerely,
Edgar F. Smith [signed]

To Mr. A. E. Marshall
3034 St. Paul St.
Baltimore, MD

A box of books that once belonged to Dr. Smith, many with his signature in them, reveals an unrecorded facet of his busy life. It contains a collection of 43 western and civil war novels by the same author, Captain Charles King. Similar in content and period to those of Zane Grey, these stories were drawn from King's experiences as an Army Cavalry officer in the 1870s (2). A graduate and former teacher at West Point, King had been stationed among the Apaches in the Tonto Basin of Northern Arizona Territory. He was among troops who made a 2000 mile march through the Big Horn region to disperse the Sioux Indians following "Custer's Last Stand". On multiple occasions he had engaged in mortal combat with Indians. He was a friend of "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who was a scout for his Company. King's writing was rich in authentic frontier and Army life. Using different names and circumstances, he wove into his stories the characters he had met, his love for horses,
and even his own serious wounding at the hands of the Apaches.

Smith’s enjoyment of Captain King’s books is attested by an envelope tucked into one of them. It contained a letter and autographed photo from Charles King to Smith. The photo shows King, at age 81, ramrod straight and immaculately uniformed, astride a handsome horse. It is inscribed: “To Prof. Edgar F. Smith, with the regards of Charles King, 1925”. The reverse of the photo proudly explains:


The letter is a poignant tribute to the character of both of these men as they neared the end of their lives:

St. Johns Military Academy
Delafield, Wis
September 26, 1925

My dear Sir:

Not in many a moon have I received a letter which gave me such pleasure as yours of the 21st inst. It is a rare thing that men of your high standing in the Educational world find time to read such work as mine, much less to attach to it any value whatsoever, and I thank you with a full heart for every word of it ... That letter goes in a special file for my grandson and namesake, and should I be able to come East next June to attend the sixtieth anniversary of the graduation of my class at West Point, I shall do myself the honor of looking you up at the University.

The estimate placed by publishers on these frontier stories of long ago differs so widely from yours that...
pointed to multiple suspects for the disappearance and supposed murder of Drood, but not even an outline of Dickens' conclusion was found. Other authors tried to finish the story but all versions were unsatisfying. Finally, British mystery lovers presented a public trial of John Jasper, with Gilbert K. Chesterton as judge and George Bernard Shaw as jury foreman. Following the same format, the Philadelphia version was elaborately staged with Dickensian costumes and a cast of eminent judges, politicians and civic leaders.

Edgar F. Smith served as a member of the jury. His selection to be seated illustrates the tongue-in-cheek nature of the evening (3):

CRIER: Juror number seven, Edgar F. Smith
CLERK: Juror, look upon the prisoner; prisoner, look upon the juror. How say you, challenge or no challenge?
DEFENSE: No challenge.
PROSECUTION: I should like to have it noted upon the record that Fate tried to conceal him by naming him Smith. (Laughter)
Q: You are Provost of the great University of this Commonwealth?
A: I am.
Q: I believe that the sun never sets on the sons of Penn? (Applause)
A: That is true.
Q: Did you ever have John Jasper or Edwin Drood enrolled upon the records of the University? (Laughter)
A: Never, sir.
Q: Then I apprehend that the love and partiality that you bear for all the sons of Penn would not obtain in this case?
A: It would not.
Q: And you could render an unbiased verdict?
A: I could, sir.
(Juror takes seat in jury box.)

Despite the levity, the trial endeavored to be objective in the evidence and the verdict. The presentation had begun at 7:30, but most of the audience were still in their seats after midnight when the jury returned a "not guilty" verdict. It was reported that the jury was at first deadlocked at six for acquittal and six for guilty. It would be interesting to know what Smith thought and said as the jury deliberated.

Another book from Smith's library carries the title, *Jenghiz Khan and Other Verses*, by Erwin Clarkson Garrett. It contains a poem dedicated to Smith (4):

To Dr. Edgar Fahs Smith upon his retirement as Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, 1920.

We may not bear to think - ye we've always known-
A keystone fair, a comrade rare - should feel the time had grown
To drop the reins your hands have held with master grip -

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We may not bear to think - ye we've always known-
A keystone fair, a comrade rare - should feel the time had grown
To drop the reins your hands have held with master grip -
Or quit the straining tiller of your loved and honored ship.

We may not bear to think - ye we've cherished long -
Ye will not stand where ye have watched your mighty craft wax strong.
Deck and deck upbuilding - mast and mast arise -
A source of pride, a cause of joy, in your all seeing eyes.

But though ye go ye never may cut the sacred bands
That bind you to the Sons of Penn through all the far flung lands,
For over hall and campus ye've cast a golden spell -
A gentle knight - a beacon light - Friend of our youth, farewell!!

There are also tattered programs for the 1934 and 1937 graduation exercises at the Edgar Fahs Smith Junior High School at York, PA, the city where Smith was born. The 1937 program celebrated the 150th anniversary of the York County Academy. A yellowed clipping explains (5):

... In celebrating this anniversary we do honor not only to the academy but to its most famous student, the late Edgar Fahs Smith," declared Mr. Kain, who stated that at the 125th anniversary celebration of the founding of the academy, Mr. Smith wanted for the 150th anniversary such a procession of representatives of educational institutions as was presented last night ... Mrs. Edgar Fahs Smith was a special guest of honor last night ...

These fragments, though few in number, reveal the Smith known only to his close friends and family and allow us to glimpse the man behind the name. Only those who have actually handled such artifacts can fully appreciate the power they possess of evoking in the handler a feeling of almost tangible contact with the personality of their long-dead owner.

References and Notes


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