

Out of the College archives

THE SYDNEY A. SMITH COLLECTION

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The papers of Sir Sydney Smith, the forensic scientist, were given to the College by his son's widow, Mrs Hazel Smith. They have now been sorted and the following is a biographical sketch of Sir Sydney based on the material in the collection.

Sydney Alfred Smith was born on the 4th of August 1883 in Roxburgh, New Zealand, the youngest son of a large family. His parents were both immigrants from Britain, and one of his grandmothers was Scottish. His mother, a strongly religious woman, was apparently well-versed in herbal remedies, which possibly contributed to his later medical interests. His Cockney father was a road contractor. Roxburgh was then a small and isolated settlement at the centre of an agricultural and gold-prospecting region, which had attracted a heterogeneous population. In his autobiography, *Mostly Murder*, Sydney Smith expresses gratitude to his village school-teacher, W. A. Reilly, for encouraging in his pupils an ambition for adventure. In one of his letters, he remarks that his school days were undistinguished by anything more than 'a certain proclivity to get into trouble'. He saw a career in medicine merely as the best passport to travel.

After leaving school, the young Sydney was apprenticed to the local chemist, one Harold Grocott, who was later to find him his first job at a dispensary in Dunedin. Here he studied and qualified in pharmacy, and passed the matriculation exams for the University of New Zealand. He took a first year course in chemistry and physics at Victoria College, whilst working in the dispensary at Wellington Hospital.

In 1908, having previously made some money in gold speculation, Sydney set off for Edinburgh with a friend to study medicine. Despite being ineligible for a scholarship in chemistry and physics, his best subjects, he won himself a Vans Dunlop scholarship in botany and zoology to see him through his first three years of study, during which he also won no less than eight medals. He graduated with first class honours in 1912, married shortly afterwards, and spent a month as a locum in Fife, but decided that general practice was not to his taste. He had been awarded a three-year research scholarship on graduation, and when seeking the

approval of the Dean of Medicine, Sir Harvey Littlejohn, for an (unpaid) part-time position in ophthalmology, his chosen speciality, he was persuaded by the professor to change to forensic medicine and take a (paid) post as his own assistant. So, almost accidentally, Sydney Smith embarked on his career as a forensic scientist. In 1914 he won a gold medal and an Alison Prize for his MD thesis on the examination of blood-stains, having taken a diploma in public health the previous year.

Harvey Littlejohn, in addition to his University position, was a chief police surgeon. Sydney assisted him with his cases, including, for example, the Winchburgh child murders, for which the father, Patrick Higgins, was hung in 1913. Sydney was responsible for 'acquiring' parts of the bodies, which had been transformed into adipocere by long immersion in water, for the university forensic medicine museum. The manuscript collection includes a section of Harvey Littlejohn's official correspondence requesting forensic evidence for such cases.

Sydney returned to New Zealand in 1914 as a medical officer of health and was transferred to the army medical corps in 1915, where he held the post of special sanitary officer with the rank of Major. In 1914 he had applied for a position as assistant to the Egyptian medico-legal expert, but his appointment was never ratified. In 1917, however, on the death of the expert, Dr Hamilton, the Egyptian government asked Sydney Smith to replace him. This post included a lectureship (later professorship) in forensic medicine at the University of Egypt in Cairo.

Whilst in Egypt, Sydney was responsible for the investigation of all murders in the country (about 1,000 a year) other violent or unexpected deaths and attempted murders. He was consulted about the assessment of injuries in claims for damages (which included a fair proportion of self-inflicted wounds and malingering); sexual offences, and other routine forensic analyses, for example, cases of cattle poisoning. Many of the cases in which he was involved were complicated by the tendency of witnesses to lie, or take bribes. He also advised the British army and the governments of Palestine and the Sudan.

During the years of unrest against the British there were a number of political murders, and Sydney's pioneering work in ballistics helped to solve these crimes, and culminated in his success in helping to identify the assassins of the Sirdar, Commander in Chief of the Egyptian Army in 1924. He soon became an expert in arsenic poisoning, since this was such a popular form of murder in Egypt. During his 10-year stay in the country, he set up forensic laboratories, introduced training methods and established a museum of crime. In 1925 he was awarded the Order of the Nile. The collection contains a section of material on his Egyptian cases, mostly in the form of notes and reports, and a file on the Sirdar's assassination.

It was in this period that Sydney wrote many of his earlier published articles. His textbook on forensic medicine first appeared in Arabic in 1924: the English version was published in 1925 and went to seven editions by 1940, winning the Swiney Prize in 1929. From 1925 he also edited new editions of Taylor's *Medical Jurisprudence*.

In 1927, on holiday in Edinburgh, Sydney assisted Harvey Littlejohn in the Merrett case with some firearm experiments which indicated that Donald Merrett had murdered his mother. Sir Bernard Spilsbury, with whom Sydney was to cross swords on several future occasions, put forward counter-arguments for the defence, and Merrett was acquitted. Later, under the alias of Chesney, he murdered both his wife and mother-in-law, and committed suicide rather than be arrested. Sir Sydney believed that anxiety about this case contributed to Harvey Littlejohn's death in the same year of 1927.

The University of Edinburgh subsequently invited Sydney to apply for the vacant Chair of Forensic Medicine. In April of 1928 he returned to Scotland to take up the post which he was to hold until his retirement in 1953. The remaining years of his career were very active with his work as a member of the University, a scientist, a legal expert and an increasingly well-known public figure. He also led a full social life.

In 1931 Sydney was made Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and was re-elected to this position until his retirement. During his Deanship 10 new Chairs were instituted; there was a four-fold increase in lectureships; the School of Medicine of the Royal Colleges was incorporated into the Faculty; clinical teaching was extended to additional hospitals; both the Dental School and the Dick Veterinary College were integrated into the University, and medical training was extended to seven years. Sydney played a prominent part in the initiation and organisation of the Polish Medical School, in recognition of which he was awarded the Order of Polonia Restituta. In 1938 he became one of the Senatus assessors on the university court, and after the death of Sir John Fraser was acting Principal (1947-48).

There are many tributes to Sydney Smith's sympathetic handling of student affairs: he was evidently well liked and respected by the whole university community. His popularity with the students was shown by his election as Rector in 1954, and the university bestowed an Honorary LLD on him in 1955, so that his connection with the university continued after his retirement. There is much material in the biographical section of the collection concerning the Rectorial election and attendant publicity. His Rectorial address, together with background research material, is filed together with other articles or addresses written in his University

capacity-such as Promotor's addresses to graduates and after dinner speeches to different student groups.

Sydney's public appointments were numerous. He was chairman of the Scottish Medical War Committee; a member of the General Medical Council, and its chairman of business from 1943. With the arrival of the National Health Service he became vice-chairman of the Scottish Hospital Services Council; chairman of the Standing Medical Advisory Committee on hospital services for Scotland, and chairman of the Hospital Endowments Commission for Scotland. His lesser known public works included patronage of the Meadows pony association, which provided opportunities for city children to enjoy the company of ponies. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1928, of the Royal College of Physicians in 1933, and of the Royal Society of New Zealand in 1956. His public and professional work was recognised by a CBE in 1944 and a Knighthood in 1949, when he also received an honorary MD from the University of Louvain. In 1956 the Law-Sciences Institute of Texas established a scholarship in his name.

Throughout his career, Sir Sydney continued to publish scientific articles on medical and forensic topics in journals such as the *BMJ*, and more practically oriented papers in publications such as the *Police Gazette* or the *Scottish Nurse*. One of the subjects in which he showed a pioneering interest was the relationship between alcohol and road safety. Others include the history of forensic medicine and medical education. Copies of most of his articles, and in many cases the drafts and other associated material, are in the collection.

Sir Sydney was frequently invited to give public lectures. Some of the most notable are the Finlayson Memorial Lecture to the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow in 1952, *Magic, medicine and religion*, an address to the York Medical Society in the same year, *Poisons and poisoners through the ages* and the inaugural Francis Shepherd memorial lecture in Montreal in 1953, which was of a historical nature. The quantity of material in the collection under these headings show the far-reaching extent of his background research for such addresses. His other speaking engagements were as diverse as the Edinburgh City Police (course lectures) in 1936: the *BBC Examining the Evidence* in 1952, and a talk in 1962 on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the appointment of Sir Henry Duncan Littlejohn as the first Medical Officer of Health for Edinburgh.

Sir Sydney's professorship did not include, as had his predecessor's, the position of chief police surgeon. Nevertheless, he frequently appeared as an expert witness, both for the Crown and for the defence. It is probably in this 'Sherlock Holmes' capacity that he is best

remembered by the general public. His autobiography, *Mostly Murder*, published in 1959, is, as the title suggests, mainly an account of notable cases in which he was involved. Material relating to these cases, sometimes quite extensive, and often including court transcripts or detailed newspaper reports, can be found in the collection. Also included are a few letters from individuals who were saved from hanging by Sir Sydney's evidence or advice. One such is Annie Hearn, who was cleared of poisoning her sister and friend by Sir Sydney's advice about the interpretation of the concentrations of arsenic found in their bodies.

Other notorious cases include the conviction of Buck Ruxton in 1936, largely due to the reconstruction and identification by Sydney Smith and his team of the cleverly dismembered bodies of his common-law wife and maid. Less spectacular, but equally interesting was the prosecution of John Ramensky, a safe-breaker, on detailed forensic evidence concerning matter found in his trouser turn-ups. Sir Sydney admits that Ramensky was a somewhat likeable character. He escaped from Peterhead Prison three times-in 1934, 1952 and again in 1958. During the war his abilities were put to use by the British who parachuted him behind enemy lines to break into Nazi safes.

Shortly before his retirement in 1953, Sir Sydney's assistance was requested by lawyers in Ceylon defending a Mr M. Sathasivam from the charge of murdering his wife. He later travelled to Colombo to give evidence. The rate at which the body had cooled was crucial in determining the time of death, which in turn was crucial to the defence. Correspondence in the collection shows how painstaking Sir Sydney was in collecting evidence on the cooling of bodies in hot climates from his forensic colleagues. Such meticulous attention to detail, and his passion for the establishment of truth and maintenance of justice were qualities which contributed to the great respect in which Sir Sydney's work was held world-wide. In this particular case, it ensured the acquittal of an innocent man.

The year 1953 was a particularly busy one for Sir Sydney. On 1st May he gave the first Francis Shepherd Memorial Lecture in Canada; later that month he appeared in Colombo for the Sathasivam trial; in June he represented the University of Edinburgh at the Coronation, and in July he gave the Promotor's address at graduation before officially retiring. In September he took up an appointment as a consultant for the World Health Organisation, travelling briefly to the Lebanon to report on their medico-legal services, then returning to Ceylon for eight months. His remit there was to advise the government on the establishment and organisation of a comprehensive medico-legal system. There is a considerable body of material in the collection relating to this project and Sir Sydney's eventual report. It appears that the facilities

for forensic work were lamentably lacking and, despite good intentions on the part of individual officials, the government machinery was not efficient enough to ensure the implementation of Sir Sydney's recommendations. Largely because of this failure, a proposed return visit later in 1954 was eventually abandoned.

Sir Sydney continued to travel extensively: he revisited New Zealand, Australia, Colombo and Egypt in 1955, and in 1960 attended the second International Meeting on Forensic Pathology and Medicine in New York, where he also promoted the American launch of *Mostly Murder*.

Harraps, the publishers of the autobiography, arranged in 1957 for Sir Sydney's manuscript to be re-worked by a collaborator, Patrick Pringle. This was partly because they felt the original writing was too academic, and partly because they had arranged a very profitable serialisation with *The People* newspaper and the style had to appeal to a wide public. There is lengthy correspondence in the collection with both Pringle and J. H. H. Gaute, the Harrap editor, concerning the progress of the book, and the occasional disagreement about the collaboration. Also included are early notes and draft material, and the final edited typescript, of interest as much for the deletions as the final text. The book, finally published in 1959, was an enormous success, receiving favourable reviews on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in New Zealand and Ceylon. After the publication of *Mostly Murder*, Sir Sydney gave a number of radio and TV interviews about his life and career.

Sir Sydney's son, Sydney Goodsir Smith, decided not to follow in his father's footsteps, but pursued a literary career, becoming a well-known Scots poet (1915-1975). It was his daughter, Catherine Mary Goodsir Smith (later Mrs Waugh) who qualified in medicine at Edinburgh in 1944, and married a fellow doctor.

There is no material in the collection relating to Sir Sydney's life after 1962, the year which saw the death of his wife, Catherine Goodsir Smith (nee Gelenick). Sir Sydney died at his home in Edinburgh on the 8th of May 1969, aged 85.