

Introduction to *Selected Writings* of Sydney Smith

I

Sydney Smith was born in 1771, two years after the invention of Watt's steam-engine and one year after Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, that vivid description of the effects of land enclosure. It was still dangerous to walk through the streets of London after dark, there were no waterproof hats, no braces, no calomel, no quinine, no clubs, no savings banks, the government was completely in the hands of great landowners, and, in the best society, one third of the gentlemen were always drunk. He died in 1845, which was also the year in which Engels' *State of the Working Classes in England* was published and Newman was received into the Roman Catholic Church. The American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the Romantic Movement had all occurred, there was gaslight in houses, there were railways through the country, the Victorian proprieties were firmly established (Bowler's *Shakespeare* appeared in 1818) and public opinion had forced Parliament to soften the rigors of pure *laissez-faire* (the first Factory Act was passed in 1833).

Sydney Smith's mother, Maria Olier, came of French Huguenot stock; his father, Robert Smith, was an eccentric unstable character who left his bride at the church door and departed to America for several years, spent the rest of his life in travel and unsuccessful speculations, and insisted on his family sitting over the dinner table in the half-dark for hours. His children, however, did better for themselves: three of his sons went to India (the only daughter stayed, of course, at home), where one died young and the other two made fortunes; Sydney, his second son, ended up as a Canon of St Paul's and the most famous wit of his generation.

Physically, he was swarthy, sturdily tending to stoutness and suffering in later life from gout. Mentally, like so many funny men, he had to struggle constantly against melancholia: he found it difficult to get up in the morning, he could not bear dimly lit rooms—"Better," he wrote, "to eat dry bread by the splendour of gas than to dine on wild beef with wax-candles"—and music in a minor key upset him. Writing to a friend who was similarly afflicted, he gave his own recipe for combating low spirits.

- (1) Go into the shower-bath with a small quantity of water at a temperature low enough to give you a slight sensation of cold, 75° or 80°.
- (2) Short views of human life—not further than dinner or tea.
- (3) Be as busy as you can.
- (4) See as much as you can of those friends who respect and like you, and of those acquaintances who amuse you.

- (5) Attend to the effects tea and coffee produce upon you.
- (6) Avoid poetry, dramatic representations (except comedy), music, serious novels, sentimental people, and everything likely to excite feeling and emotion, not ending in active benevolence.
- (7) Keep good blazing fires.
- (8) Be firm and constant in the exercise of rational religion.

This illustrates well enough both the virtues of his mind and its limitations. Such a man will always have an excellent grasp of the concrete and the immediately possible, but one must not expect from him profound speculative insights. Sydney Smith was perfectly sincere in his religious faith, but one is not surprised to find that, as a young man, his ambition was to read for the Bar and that it was only lack of money which compelled him instead to take Holy Orders. In his admirable attacks on religious intolerance the reader cannot but be conscious of a distrust of all theological dogma until he wonders whether Sydney Smith could have explained just why he was an Anglican and not, say, a Unitarian. His criticisms of the Methodists and the Puseyites are acute enough but one cannot help feeling that it was religious "enthusiasm" as such, not merely the follies to which it is liable, which aroused his scorn and distrust.

II

The Finances of the Church Visible are always a fascinating subject. As a State Church, the revenues of the Church of England are derived, partly from property which it owns, partly from taxation but comparatively little from the alms of the faithful. Patronage is not solely in the hands of the Crown; some livings are bestowed by bishops, some by cathedral chapters and many by private patrons. With its money it has to pay for the upkeep of churches and parsonages and to secure for every parish, if it can, a vicar of good manners and education. Moreover, since most Anglican clergymen are married men, they will need enough money to support and educate their families.

In Sydney Smith's time, by his own calculations, the total revenues of the Church would, if equally divided, have been sufficient to give every minister excluding curates, an annual income of £250—"about the same as that enjoyed by the upper domestic of a nobleman." Needless to say, its revenues were not so divided, but ranged from rich sees like Canterbury, worth £25,000, to country livings worth no more than £150. In the competition for preferment, those who had sufficient private means to endure the rigors of their early clerical years and those with good social connections who could gain the ears of the disposers of patronage had, naturally, a great advantage. It was not, however, impossible for a person of humble birth to succeed.

Sydney Smith paints the following picture of the ecclesiastical career of a baker's son:

Young Crumpet is sent to school—takes to his books—spends the best years of his life, as all eminent Englishmen do, in making Latin verses—knows that the *crum* in *crum-pet* is long, and the *pet* short—goes to the University—gets a prize for an Essay on the Dispersion of the Jews—takes orders—becomes a Bishop's chaplain—has a young nobleman for his pupil—publishes an useless classic, and a serious call to the unconverted—and then goes through the Elysian transitions of Prebendary, Dean, Prelate, and the long train of purple, profit and power.

It is not hard to deduce from this description the personal qualities best fitted for a rise from obscurity to a mitre: an unoriginal brightness of intellect which is good at passing exams but not at thinking for itself, a proper respect for titles, a talent for flattery, a solemn mien and, above all, Tory political opinions.

Sydney Smith possessed none of these; intellectual ability he had in abundance but of a dangerously lively kind; though he came to number many titled and rich people among his friends, he was utterly without snobbery and incapable of flattery; he was continually making jokes and, worst of all, he was a convinced Whig. Yet, starting from the bottom—with an income of £100 a year and no influential friends—he rose, if not to a bishopric, to a residential canon of St Paul's at a salary of £2,000 a year. It may be not without interest to consider how he did it. His career began with a stroke of good luck: the local squire of the Wiltshire village where he was a young curate took a shine to him and asked him to accompany his son as a tutor on the Grand Tour. Sydney Smith recommended Weimar but the outbreak of war made it impossible and they went to Edinburgh instead. There he met Jeffrey, Brougham, and Francis Horner and started with them *The Edinburgh Review*, devoted to the criticism of contemporary literature and the furthering of Whig policies. The review was an instantaneous success and Smith began to be talked about. In 1800 he married for love and the marriage seems to have remained a singularly happy one. The only gift he had for his bride was six worn silver teaspoons and she, though she possessed some small means of her own, had presently to sell her mother's jewelry to meet expenses. In 1803 the couple moved to London, where he managed to live by preaching at the Foundling Hospital and lecturing on Moral Philosophy at The Royal Institution. Through his elder brother he was introduced into the Holland House circle, the center of Whig society, of which he quickly became a popular and admired member. He was still, however, too poor to afford an umbrella, far less a carriage; moreover, his new friends, while cultivated and rich, belonged to the party which was out of power and likely to remain so. Again, he had a stroke of luck for, after Pitt's death, the Whigs

came into power for a few months, just long enough to appoint him to the living of Foston in Yorkshire, worth £500 a year. Foston had not had a resident vicar since the reign of Charles II and Smith had no intention of leaving the social amenities of London which he loved for the country which he regarded as “a healthy grave” and where it seemed to him as if “the whole creation were going to expire at tea-time.” In 1808, however, a Tory government passed the Clergy Residence Bill and he was banished, at the age of thirty-eight, to a village “twelve miles from a lemon,” its existing parsonage a brick-floored kitchen with one room above it, there to do duty for the next twenty years.

Any man might have quailed at the prospect but for an intellectual and man-about-town like Smith, anonymous author of *The Peter Plymley Letters* which had electrified the public and enraged the government, accustomed to the best tables, the best conversation, the most elegant ladies and gentlemen, it must have seemed the end, and a stranger might well have expected him to lapse into despondency and drink. He did nothing of the kind. He kept up his reading, his reviewing, and his large correspondence; he designed a new parsonage for himself and got the local carpenter to furnish it; he devised all sorts of ingenious gadgets—devices for added draft to the fires, devices to prevent smoky chimneys, lamps burning mutton-fat to save the expense of candles, a special scratcher pole for all his animals etc., and, far from neglecting his parish duties, became one of the best county vicars of whom there is record, and the idol of his parishioners. Church services were only a small part of his ministrations: he started small vegetable gardens, let out to the laborers at very low rents, to help them augment their food supply; he experimented with diets to discover which were both cheap and nourishing; he acted as their doctor and, as a local magistrate, saved many of them from going unjustly to jail.

During the first half of his residence at Foston, he was never free from financial anxiety—during the bad harvest year of 1816, for instance, he could no more afford to buy white flour than could his parishioners—but in 1820 an unexpected legacy from an aunt lightened his burden and in 1828, as in 1808, a brief Coalition Ministry including Whigs remembered him and procured him a canonry at Bristol and the living of Combe Florey in Somerset which, though it did not increase his income, was a step up in the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy.

From then on his life was smooth sailing: two causes in which he was a leader triumphed—the Catholic Emancipation Act was passed in 1829 and the Reform Bill in 1832,—his services were rewarded in his sixty-first year by a canonry at St Paul’s, and then his unmarried younger brother died, leaving him a third of his very large fortune. He was now rich, popular, and famous. A letter he wrote shortly before his death aptly describes the last fourteen years of his life:

Being Canon of St Paul's in London, and a rector of a parish in the country, my time is divided equally between town and country. I am living among the best society in the Metropolis, and at ease in my circumstances; in tolerable health, a mild Whig, a tolerating Churchman, and much given to talking, laughing and noise. I dine with the rich in London, and physic the poor in the country; passing from the saucers of Dives to the sores of Lazarus. I am, upon the whole, a happy man, have found the world an entertaining place, and am thankful to Providence for the part allotted to me in it.

III

Many of Sydney Smith's wisecracks are widely known. Nowell Smith's definitive edition of his letters (Oxford Press, 1953) must already have convinced many readers that he is among the supreme masters of the epistolary art, but his published writings still seem to be little known. This is understandable because Smith was not a poet or a novelist but from first to last a writer of polemics, as pure an example as we have in English of *l'écrivain engagé*.

As a general rule it is the fate of the polemical writer to be forgotten when the cause for which he fought has been won or is no longer a live issue, and it will always be difficult to persuade a later generation that there can be exceptions, polemical writers, journalists if you will, of such brilliance and charm that they can be read with delight and admiration by those to whom their subject matter is in itself of little interest.

Literary criticism, too, is apt to avoid the polemical writer because there is little to say about him. Unlike the creator of "pure" literature, the poet, the novelist, the dramatist etc., he rarely shows "development," stylistic or ideological. His cast of mind, his way of expressing himself are generally established early and any variety that his work may show will come mostly from a variety in the topics upon which he writes.

Nevertheless there are a few such authors who must be ranked very high by any literary standard and first among such I would place Hooker, Swift, Sydney Smith and Bernard Shaw. Milton in his polemical works is too bad-mannered and abusive, and Junius, for all his brilliance, too biased.

Of them all, Sydney Smith has, perhaps, the most exact sense of the particular audience he is addressing on any given occasion, and the widest variation of tone. He can equally well speak to the average educated man—

Is it necessary that the Archbishop of Canterbury should give feasts to Aristocratic London; and that the domestics of the Prelacy should stand with swords and bag-wigs round pig and turkey, and venison, to defend, as it were, the Orthodox gastronome from the fierce Unitarian, the fell Baptist, and all the famished children of Dissent.

(*Letters to Archdeacon Singleton*)

to the unlettered rustic—

I don't like that red nose, and those blear eyes, and that stupid, down-cast look. You are a drunkard. Another pint, and one pint more; a glass of gin and water, rum and milk, cider and pepper, a glass of peppermint, and all the beastly fluids which drunkards pour down their throats. . . . It is all nonsense about not being able to work without ale, and gin, and cider, and fermented liquors. Do lions and cart-horses drink ale? It is mere habit. . . . I have no objection, you will observe, to a moderate use of ale, or any other liquor you can *afford* to purchase. My objection is, that you cannot afford it; that every penny you spend at the alehouse comes out of the stomachs of the poor children, and strips off the clothes of the wife—

(“Advice to Parishioners”)

and a child—

Lucy, dear child, mind your arithmetic. You know, in the first sum of yours I ever saw, there was a mistake. You had carried two (as a cab is licensed to do) and you ought, dear Lucy, to have carried but one. Is this a trifle? What would life be without arithmetic but a scene of horrors? . . . I now give you my parting advice. Don't marry any body who has not a tolerable understanding and a thousand a year, and God bless you, dear child.

Always lucid, well-informed and fair to his opponents, he is equally at home with the long period and the short, the ornate vocabulary and the plain, and is a master of every rhetorical effect, the satirical inversion—

Their object is to preserve game; they have no objection to preserve the lives of their fellow creatures also, if both can exist at the same time; if not, the least worthy of God's creatures must fall—the rustic without a soul—not the Christian partridge—not the immortal pheasant—not the rational woodcock, or the accountable hare.

the ironic description of shocking facts in tea-table terms—

One summer's whipping, only one: the thumb-screw for a short season; a little light easy torturing between Lady-day and Michaelmas.

the homely simile—

You may not be aware of it yourself, most reverend Abraham, but you deny their freedom to the Catholics upon the same principle that Sarah your wife refuses to give the receipt for a ham or a gooseberry dumpling: she refuses her receipts, not because they secure to her a certain flavour, but because they remind her that her neighbours want it: a feel-

ing laughable in a priestess, shameful in a priest; venial when it withholds the blessings of a ham, tyrannical and execrable when it narrows the boon of religious freedom.

and the ringing peroration of righteous anger—

If I lived at Hampstead upon stewed meats and claret; if I walked to church every Sunday before eleven young gentlemen of my own begetting with their faces washed, and their hair pleasingly combed; if the Almighty had blessed me with every earthly comfort—how awfully would I pause before I sent forth the flame and the sword over the cabins of the poor, brave, generous, open-hearted peasants of Ireland. . . . The vigour I love consists in finding out wherein subjects are aggrieved, in relieving them, in studying the temper and genius of a people, in consulting their prejudices, in selecting proper persons to lead and manage them, in the laborious, watchful, and difficult task of increasing public happiness by allaying each particular discontent. . . . But this, in the eyes of Mr Percival, is imbecility and meanness: houses are not broken open—women are not insulted—the people seem all to be happy; they are not rode over by horses, and cut by whips. Do you call this vigour? Is this government?

His command of comic effects is equally extensive and masterly. Many of his impromptu puns are still remembered, such as his remark on hearing two women screaming insults at each other from upper stories on opposite sides of a narrow street in Edinburgh:

Those two women will never agree: they are arguing from different premises.

His particular forte, perhaps, is the treatment of analogical situations as identical; during the period of the Luddite riots he wrote to a friend:

What do you think of all these burnings? and have you heard of the new sort of burnings? Ladies' maids have taken to setting their mistresses on fire. Two dowagers were burned last week, and large rewards are offered! They are inventing little fire-engines for the toilet table, worked with lavender water!

Lastly, he can create pictures in what might be called the ludicrous baroque style, as surely as Pope:

Frequently did Lord John meet the destroying Bishops; much did he commend their daily heap of ruins; sweetly did they smile on each other, and much charming talk was there of meteorology and catarrh, and the particular cathedral they were pulling down at the time; till one fine morning the Home Secretary, with a voice more bland, and a look more

ardently affectionate, than that which the masculine mouse bestows on his nibbling female, informed them that the Government meant to take all the Church property into their own hands, to pay the rates out of it, and deliver the residue to the rightful possessors. Such an effect, they say, was never before produced by a *coup de théâtre*. The Commission was separated in an instant: London clenched his fist; Canterbury was hurried out by his chaplains, and put into a warm bed; a solemn vacancy spread itself over the face of Gloucester; Lincoln was taken out in strong hysterics.

IV

Sydney Smith is a perfect expression of the Whig mentality, of that English form of Liberalism which has always perplexed and sometimes enraged Continental observers both on the political Right and on the political Left. European liberalism, which has normally been anti-clerical, republican, and materialist, finds it bewildering that social reform in England should owe so much to religion—that the British Labour Party, for example, should be so closely associated with the Evangelical movement, and the increasing concern over juvenile delinquency and other cultural problems of urbanization with Anglo-Catholicism—and that the English Liberal who desires the abolition of the Crown or the House of Lords should be so rare a bird. Liberals like Godwin and H. G. Wells are atypical, and much closer to the European mind.

For the European who knows a little history, it is all the more puzzling, since he is aware that Voltaire and the French Encyclopaedists of the Enlightenment who were the founders of continental Liberalism were inspired by and took many of their ideas from Locke, the Deists, and the Whig authors of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. If he is a pro-clerical monarchist, he is apt to conclude that the English Liberal is a materialist at heart who is only using religious sentiments as a smoke-screen, and to point to the ambiguities of the Thirty-Nine Articles as proof that an Anglican does not know what he believes; if he is an anti-clerical rationalist, he is apt to come to similar doubts about the Englishman's Liberal convictions, citing in evidence his devotion to irrational political institutions.

The clue to the difference is to be found in the difference in meaning of the word *Revolution* as applied to the events which took place in France in 1789 and as applied to the events which took place in England in 1688. In the former case it means a radical transformation, the birth of a new kind of society, in the latter it is an astronomical metaphor, meaning a restoration of balance. The radical transformation of English society which corresponds to the French Revolution was the work of the Tudors. The execution of Charles I was not, like the execution of Louis XVI, a revolutionary breach with the

past but the restoration of a conservative, even medieval, idea, namely, that the ruler is not above but subject to Natural Law. Then, from their experiences under the Protectorate, Englishmen learned that the dangers of arbitrary power were not necessarily removed simply by the abolition of the Crown, for the claims of self-appointed saints to know by divine inspiration what the good life should be and to have the right to impose their notions on the ungodly could be as great a threat as the divine right of kings. The historical experience with which the Whigs of 1688 and their successors had to cope was a century and a half of bitter quarrels and drastic changes imposed upon the public by individuals or minorities. The most fundamental notion in English Liberalism, therefore, is the notion of limited sovereignty and its characteristic way of thinking goes something like this:

- (1) All people differ from each other in character and temperament so that any attempt to impose an absolute uniformity is a tyranny. On the other hand there can be no social life unless the members of a society hold certain beliefs in common, and behave in certain commonly accepted ways.
- (2) The beliefs which it is necessary to hold in common must therefore be so defined that differences of emphasis are possible and the laws which regulate social conduct must be such that they command common consent. In so far as conformity has to be enforced, this should be in matters of outward behavior not of private belief, firstly because there can be no doubt whether an individual does or does not conform, and secondly because men find behaving in a way with which they are not in complete sympathy more tolerable than being told to believe something they consider false. Thus, in the English Prayer Book the rules for conducting the Liturgy are precise, while the meaning of the Thirty-Nine Articles is purposely left vague.
- (3) The way in which a reform is effected is just as important as the reform itself. Violent change is as injurious to freedom as inertia.
- (4) Utopians are a public menace. Reformers must concern themselves with the concrete and the possible.

The authors of the French Enlightenment were confronted with a very different situation, a static society in which nothing had changed. To the French Liberal, therefore, nothing could seem to matter except that a radical change should occur and the threat to freedom was not absolute sovereignty as such but the imprisonment of the majority in an arbitrary social status. A Jacobin like St Just could accept the notion of absolute sovereignty without question so long as it was taken from the Crown and given to the people. Materialism was a natural philosophy for French Liberalism to adopt since its enemy was the aristocrat who claimed privilege on biological grounds

(few of the English peerages in the eighteenth century were more than two hundred years old), and it was no less natural that this materialism should be militantly dogmatic since the philosophy European Liberalism associated with the *ancien régime*, the theology of the Roman Catholic Church, was itself rigid and uncompromising.

Sydney Smith is an example of English Liberalism at its best. He is never Utopian or given to large generalizations but always attacks a specific abuse, and the reform he proposes is equally specific and always possible to realize. Further, he assumes that, though most people are selfish and many people are stupid, few are either lunatics or deliberate scoundrels impervious to rational argument.

Thus, in attacking the Game Laws, he avoids raising ultimate questions about the justice or injustice of private property and its unequal distribution, and sticks to the immediate issue of man-traps, spring-guns and the like. Assuming that no sane man will deny that they are cruel, he points out that they are unnecessary for the purpose for which they are intended; the prevention of poaching can be achieved by humane means, namely by giving every landlord, great or small, the right to kill game, by making game private property like geese or ducks and by allowing the owner to sell game to whom he chooses since, as long as the sale of game is forbidden and there are rich men who want it, a black market supplied by poachers is inevitable.

Knowing both the world of the rich and the world of the poor and an enemy of neither, he is aware that many injustices to the poor exist, not because the rich are intentionally unjust but because their own world has never felt them. In attacking the law which denied defense counsel to prisoners accused of a felony, a leftover from feudal times when a defense of prisoners accused by the Crown was felt to imply disloyalty, he explains very simply why, though this feeling no longer existed, the law still remained on the statute books.

To ask why there are not petitions—why the evil is not more noticed, is mere parliamentary froth and ministerial juggling. Gentlemen are rarely hung. If they were so, there would be petitions without end for counsel.

There is a certain type of professional Liberal who assumes that in every issue the liberal position must be on the Left. Sydney Smith was never fooled in this way, as a comparison of his two principal set of pamphlets, the *Peter Plymley Letters* and the *Letters to Archdeacon Singleton*, clearly demonstrates. In the former his opponent is the conservative. Laws prohibiting Roman Catholics from voting or holding public offices, which when they were originally passed may have had some justification—an attempt to bring back the Stuarts might have met with their support—were still in effect, long after any such danger had passed. Sydney Smith assumes that the vast majority of

those who opposed their repeal were capable of seeing that they were unjust, if he can demonstrate that there was no danger incurred by removing them. With the inveterately stupid or demagogic minority, his argument is different; he warns them of the unpleasant material consequences to themselves which will follow if they refuse to listen to their conscience.

In the case of the Singleton letters, his enemies are not those who refuse to make a needed reform but those who would impose a necessary reform from above in a hasty and unjust manner. What right, he asks, have the bishops to make changes without consulting the lower clergy who will be most affected by them and whose experience of parochial life make them better equipped to make concrete judgements about abuses instead of generalisations. Further he complains that much of the plan for reform was Utopian, since to do what it was intended to do would require a sum of money which the Church did not possess.

In his opposition to secret ballot, later experience has shown us that he was mistaken, because he did not foresee—neither, for that matter, did his opponents—a day when there would arise one-party governments prepared to use all the instruments of coercion at their disposal to ensure an overwhelming vote in their favour. Even so, he makes two points in his pamphlet which no liberal democracy should forget; firstly, that the free voter must hold himself responsible for the consequence of his vote:

Who brought that mischievous profligate villain into Parliament? Let us see the names of his real supporters. Who stood out against the strong and uplifted arm of power? Who discovered this excellent and hitherto unknown person? . . . Is it not a dark and demoralising system to draw this veil over human actions, to say to the mass, be base, and you will not be despised; be victorious and you will not be honored—

and secondly that the free voter is the voter whose choice is determined by what he believes to be in the best interest of his country and by nothing else.

The Radicals are quite satisfied if a rich man of popular manners gains the votes and affections of his dependents; but why is not this as bad as intimidation? The real object is to vote for the good politician, not for the kind-hearted or agreeable man: the mischief is just the same to the country whether I am smiled into a corrupt choice, or frowned into a corrupt choice.

V

Today the Whig tradition which Sydney Smith represented is under a cloud. It is under attack for being aesthetically unappealing and psychologically or metaphysically shallow.

. . . what is Whiggery?
 A levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind
 That never looked out of the eye of a saint
 Or out of a drunkard's eye.

Yet, unattractive and shallow as one may feel so many liberals to be, how rarely on any concrete social issue does one find the liberal position the wrong one. Again, how often, alas, do those very philosophers and writers who have most astounded us by their profound insights into the human heart and human existence, dismay us by the folly and worse of their judgments on the issues of everyday life.

Liberalism is also under criticism for being ineffective and in so far as we have to combat enemies with whom rational discussion is impossible because the absolute presuppositions on both sides are radically different, the criticism has some justification. Some of us, however, seem in danger of forgetting that rational discussion is desirable and that liberty is not just a value of which one approves in the abstract but, to be real, must be embodied in one's own person and daily acts. Indeed, the more critical a situation, the less the opinions a man expresses matter in comparison with his behavior. On this, if nothing else, the sober Whig and the wild Existentialist will agree. What a challenge to a second Landor it would be to compose an Imaginary Conversation between the shades of the author of the *Letters to Archdeacon Singleton* and the author of *Attack on Christendom*.

I should not be surprised if they understood each other much better than one would naturally expect. They both disliked abstract systems, they were both strikingly original personalities and they could both be very funny. Kierkegaard, whose chief complaint against the bourgeois was that they were a parody of the Knight of Faith, would have appreciated, I think, Sydney Smith's use of bourgeois terms to define *A Nice Person*:

A nice person is neither too tall nor too short, looks clean and cheerful, has no prominent features, makes no difficulties, is never displaced, sits bodkin, is never foolishly affronted, and is void of affectations. . . . A nice person is clear of trumpery little passions, acknowledges superiority, delights in talent, shelters humility, pardons adversity, forgives deficiency, respects all men's rights, never stops the bottle, is never long and never wrong, always knows the day of the month, the name of everybody at table, and never gives pain to any human being. . . . A nice person never knocks over wine or melted butter, does not tread upon the dog's foot, or molest the family cat, eats soup without noise, laughs in the right place, and has a watchful and attentive eye.

Selected Writings of Sydney Smith, edited and with an introduction by W. H. Auden, 1956