

Albert E. S. Smythe (taken from *Theosophy in Canada*)

By Ted G. Davy

Albert Ernest Stafford Smythe was born on December 27, 1861 at Gracehill, Ballymena, County Antrim, Ireland (now part of Northern Ireland). On his father's side he could claim German ancestry, while his mother was the last of the direct line of an old Irish family, the Carys of Redcastle. It is interesting to note that early in his writing career he occasionally used "Grace Hill" as one of his pseudonyms. Ben Madighan was another *nom-de-plume*, borrowed from the name of a small mountain not far from his place of birth. In 1872 the family moved from the village of Gracehill to the town of Ballymena. They moved again in 1876 to the city of Belfast.

Throughout his long life he retained fond memories of the Emerald Isle. When he was 85 he received a picture postcard of a quiet little watering place on the north-east coast of County Antrim, and reminisced that at age 5 he saw the sea breakers there, and remembered his joy of paddling in salt water for the first time. Ever the poet, he even put these feelings into verse, beginning:

To me a child on Carnlough's sandy shore
Came first the sight of
oceans' rolling waves.¹

The young Smythe grew up surrounded by a loving and talented family. It is believed he was an only child. In his earlier years they attended the Moravian Church, where his father played the organ. In later life he recalled that this Church's official title is *Unitas Fratrum*, or United Brethren, and noted the parallel between its principles and those of the Theosophical Society. Theosophy's concept of Universal Brotherhood without any distinctions was to have a major influence on his life and personal philosophy.

Apart from formal schooling, his development, as he himself remembered, was largely influenced at home by nature, music, books and religion. Reading was a consuming element of his childhood, and he was permitted unrestricted access to books and magazines. Music too was an important factor in his early life: it seems all his relatives without exception were accomplished musicians and he would have heard a variety of instruments played in his home. Eighty years after the fact, a childhood friend remembered, "One of the great treats as children was to be taken to his grandmother Cary's house to listen to her playing on her harp." Of his own musical knowledge he said little. In later years, Albert did mention that he sang contralto when, at age eleven, he began attending the Protestant Episcopal Church of Ireland and joined the choir; also, that as a young man he sang in church choirs in Chicago and Scotland. Something of the family talent must have rubbed off, however, because

¹Opening lines of a poem probably written in 1944 and apparently never published. Draft MSS in writer's possession.

he did write the music as well as the words to his “Hymn for the Peace” which was first published for the Armistice in November 1918.

What appears to have been a happy family life throughout the whole of his childhood and youth was not without sadness. Albert’s mother died on December 1, 1878, a few weeks short of his 17th birthday.

His formal education progressed from the Gracehill Academy to the Ballymena Model National School and the Belfast Royal Academical Institution. He was also awarded certificates in science from South Kensington Department classes in Belfast. While this is obviously below university level, it must be remembered that in those years it was enough to elevate him to the ranks of a fortunate educated few because the overwhelming majority of children then left school at thirteen or fourteen years of age. Apart from regular schooling he put great importance on his early reading (at age 7 he was absorbing such authors as Charles Kingsley). Late in life he wrote, “[T]o these early books and their messages I attribute the qualities which my inner consciousness chose to build up the personality by which the Ego is recognized in this incarnation.”

Albert’s movements during the first few years after he left school are uncertain. It is possible that he intended to emigrate immediately to America. A short biographical note in a collection of Canadian poetry published in 1916 includes the following statement: “When a young man of eighteen, he was shipwrecked while voyaging to New York, and all his possessions lost.”² As far as is known, this intriguing story is not repeated in any other biographical note, and there is no means of confirming it. Smythe must have been aware of this published report, but apparently made no attempt to repudiate it because, interestingly, a revised edition of the same collection published ten years later contains one change in the quoted sentence—in this instance his age is given as seventeen.

Limited though it may have been, his schooling, combined with what he taught himself in his youth, was evidently an excellent foundation for what proved to be a remarkable life. But his career was very slow to develop. Unless he had certain ambitions later abandoned, it is rather surprising that he first took on what must have been essentially a clerical occupation in Belfast. He wrote:

I was assistant secretary in a diocesan office for several years and met daily and became intimate with many of the six hundred clergymen of the diocese who were constantly coming and going in the office. They might all have said with St. Paul, “We also are men of like passions with you.” I found them like other men, and the experience was of value in enabling me to discard the false estimate that attaches to men merely because they button their collars at the back.³

Valuable experience indeed. Far more so than the work itself, which included writing marriage licences. But this was a dead end occupation with little to challenge his fine mind, and it is not surprising that his thoughts turned once again to the New World.

The year 1884 marked a turning point in Albert’s life. There is a hint that a young woman he loved died that year, and her death inspired an elegaic that is one of the most moving poems among the hundreds he wrote. So strong an impression was the

²John W. Garvin, ed., *Canadian Poets* (1916), 348.

³A.E.S.S., “How Theosophy Came to C.W.L.” *CT* 11: 2 (April 1930), 61-62.

sad memory of her passing that sixty years later he republished the poem, together with a photo identified only with the initials "E.C.J." It was a case, he wrote, ". . . where the death of a girl at eighteen led to a successful search for the truths embodied in Theosophy." That Fall the personality described as Albert E.S. Smythe (as he usually signed himself when not just using his initials) decided to experience more of the world than Belfast could offer and left Ireland to start a new life in America. He wrote:

In my 23rd year after long study of history, poetry, general literature, science and the scriptures I set out to find Truth.⁴

Only a few days before leaving Ireland, he was given a eulogistic sendoff by the Richmond (Belfast) Literary Club, of which he had been one of the original members five years earlier. A printed address to mark the occasion is indicative of the young man's fine character. Dated Belfast, 11th November, 1884, it reads in part:

Your marked literary abilities have rendered your contributions to the literature of the Club eminently noteworthy. You have at all times been exceedingly generous in placing before the Club the fruits of your extended reading; while your criticism of the labours of others has been marked by delicacy of feeling and expression.

In the executive work of the Club you have always occupied a prominent position. The success of the session in which you performed the onerous duties of Secretary, bore ample testimony to your energy, ability, and personal influence; while, as a vice-president, your conduct in the chair has been courteous, graceful and dignified.

Some may see in this as indicative of the saying that "coming events cast their shadows before." It suggests Smythe's strong literary bent began when he was still a teenager. In fact, he was contributing poems to English and Irish periodicals at least as early as 1881.

His quest for Truth was to have a profound influence on the history of Theosophy in Canada, as well as on the direction his life would take. He boarded the west bound SS Wisconsin off Belfast lough, where it had called briefly to pick up additional passengers after sailing from Liverpool on November 15, 1884 bound for New York. The timing could not have been better as far as the Theosophical movement in Canada was concerned. It so happened that among the few passengers already on board was William Q. Judge, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society in 1875. He was returning to New York after his meetings with various fellow Theosophists in India and Europe. There were only a few passengers on that voyage, and in the following eleven days they were able to get to know each other quite well. Meeting Mr. Judge, and hearing him discourse on Theosophy was a turning point and a lasting influence in Smythe's life. From that time he was a most devoted student of Theosophy and was ceaselessly active in the Theosophical movement until his death in 1947.

(It may be observed that the three objects of the Theosophical Society were such that he could readily embrace them without compromising any part of his personal philosophy. The ideal of universal brotherhood fitted in with his Moravian upbringing; indeed, he once said that he had absolutely no colour prejudice and that

⁴Smythe, "The Blavatsky Centenary" *CT* 12: 6 (Aug 1931), 164.

white or black looked alike to him. Likewise, unexplained laws of nature had sparked his interest even when a child and he had investigated Spiritualism when quite young. Also, he was already as keen a student of religion, philosophy and science as anyone.)

After landing in New York, he went to Chicago, in which city and environs he lived and worked for two and a half years. He said little of this phase of his life, except that it included “happy months of Illinois farm life.” There is no record of his having a formal association with the Theosophical Movement at this time; nor is it known how far he pursued Theosophical studies in this period. In later years he recalled that an active Theosophist, W.P. Phelon, was employed in the same firm in Chicago as he: the A.C. McClurg & Co., so at least he would have someone with which to discuss their new found philosophy. For the most part, however, he was reticent regarding the time he spent in Chicago.

In April, 1887 he returned to the United Kingdom, but did not resettle in Ireland. He went instead to Edinburgh, Scotland, where he worked for Messrs. Cowan & Company, Paper Makers, apparently in a book-keeping capacity. Tongue in cheek he wrote that there he “. . . introduced Theosophy into the counting house with a certain purifying effect which was appreciated.”

In Edinburgh other things besides work consumed his time. Voluntary service was characteristic of his busy personal life then and in the future. Some of his spare hours would have been taken up with the military. In this period he served as a private in the 35th Company, Queen’s Edinburgh Volunteer Brigade; he also sang in the choir of St. Giles’ Cathedral in the city. But most of all it was Theosophy that engaged his greatest attention:

Living in Edinburgh during 1887 till 1889 I happened to be staying in the same lodging as Mr. and Mrs. Fothergill, then members of the Scottish Lodge [of the Theosophical Society], a private lodge, of which Dr. [George] Dickson was President and J.W. Brodie-Innes, the novelist, was Secretary. I was not invited to join, but the Library of the Lodge was placed at my disposal and was a great and valuable opportunity for study. I read all the available Theosophical literature at that time with the result of doing a little propoganda on my own account. As a result Mr. A.P. Cattanach, Mr. Charles Oliver and some others became interested, and after my departure, Mr. Cattanach who had become a member, was instrumental in publishing the *Transactions of the Scottish Lodge* with many valuable papers and illustrations. He also founded the Edinburgh Lodge for public work and when he moved to London later was a force in the Battersea Lodge.⁵

As well as fellow Cowan employees Cattanach and Oliver, Smythe’s earnestness in the Theosophical cause infected others, though less successfully. He recalled in humourous vein: “I interested others in the subject in Edinburgh and with notable results. One enthusiastic student has since taken hold of Bahaism. Others have gone in various directions. Few have stood still.”

⁵Albert E.S. Smythe, *CT* 14: 6 (August 1933), 177. The *Transactions* were reprinted in facsimile by the Edmonton Theosophical Society in 1991.

Andrew Petrie Cattanach (1856-1939) was devoted to both Theosophy and Masonry, and was one who did not “stand still”. Distance failed to dull their friendship, which was maintained through regular correspondence. On the death of his friend in 1939, Smythe paid tribute to him in a long and appreciative obituary. The two years Smythe spent in Edinburgh were evidently happy and fulfilling, and the thought of departure must have been a wrench. Lines in a poem he wrote in May 1889 hints at his sadness at this time:

Leave these bright Scottish years and each dear tie, Faces of friends,
kind hands, warm hearts. . .⁶

Nevertheless, he must have felt it was time to make another career move.

He once said that in 1889 he had the choice between studying in London or going to America to work. The choice was a matter of principle: by now he had so thoroughly embraced Theosophy that he was determined to do his part in promoting it while maintaining the highest of ethics. Chided by friends thirty or more years later for not taking advantage of the opportunity of visiting Madame H. P. Blavatsky at her London residence before leaving Scotland, he humbly explained that he did not think himself fit to enter her presence. It is highly unlikely she would have refused to see him. Indeed, she did not deny many a celebrity seeker far less worthy than he to take up her time.

So once again he set out to seek employment on the other side of the Atlantic. It was in the summer of 1889 when he embarked on the liner *Sarnia* in Belfast and once again sailed to North America. His original intention was to return to Chicago but “Destiny or Karma decided for Canada.” This came about because Albert met Canadians on board, one of whom persuaded him to go to Ottawa. Acting on this advice, after disembarking at Montreal he proceeded directly to the Capital. There, he later wrote:

[T]he day after my arrival, I found employment with a contractor’s supply firm and entered on the sale of cement and sewer pipes with such good will that in a few weeks I was sent down to Toronto to manage the branch of the firm there. I arrived in Toronto on September 10, 1889, and at once devoted my scanty leisure to Theosophical propaganda.⁷

It was a whirlwind introduction to Canada: his sojourn in Ottawa lasted for only six weeks. And there were other matters demanding his attention.

According to his son, Conn Smythe (1895-1980), Albert married Yorkshire born Mary Adelaide (Polly) Constantine “on a boat bringing them to Canada.”⁸ He evidently meant they *met* at that time, i.e., on board the *Sarnia*, because the marriage actually took place on December 19, 1889. So opposite were the couple in every respect that theirs must have been a strange union indeed. One can only wonder how the relatively staid Albert even became involved in this shipboard romance, let alone continuing it after landing. As their son Conn recalled in his Memoirs, *If You Can’t Beat ‘Em in the Alley . . .*:

⁶Smythe, “Evening Lark Song” poem written at a rural railway station en route to Glasgow, leaving Scotland, 9 p.m., 20th May 1889. In *Poems Grave and Gay*, 120.

⁷[Smythe], “The Personal Factor” *CT* 25: 11 (Jan 1945), 342.

⁸Conn Smythe with Scott Young, *If You Can’t Beat ‘Em in the Alley*, 10.

. . . I never remember them living together for more than a few months at a time. He was seven years older, but that wasn't the problem. He was gentle, quiet, teetotal, a vegetarian, and a theosophist. She . . . wasn't.⁹

Actually, Mary was a member of the Theosophical Society for a short time and so nominally could be described as a Theosophist, but obviously she did not share her husband's high ideals. They even contrasted physically: her son described her as ". . . short, plump and pretty, and carefree" while tall and lanky Albert was of a serious disposition.

Towards the end of 1889, he entered a business partnership in a building supply company in Toronto. It appears he had little head for trade, but with a wife to support, the business was a necessary occupation. Moreover, being self-employed, he was able to channel some of his time and energy to other interests, especially writing and Theosophy.

Although Theosophy had already been an important part of his life for several years, he did not formally apply for membership in the Theosophical Society until October, 1889.¹⁰ At the same time he also wrote to William Q. Judge, who was then General Secretary of the American Section of the Theosophical Society. Judge remembered his Irish fellow passenger of five years earlier, saying, "I have thought of you often." He advised that he knew of no other Theosophists in Toronto whom Smythe could contact, but sent circulars and tracts to be used for propaganda purposes. In the following months, Smythe did everything he could to contact like minds in the city. He wrote letters about Theosophy to the papers and distributed hundreds of pamphlets among professional and business people, and although this effort failed to attract many, it was not without success. Thirty years later one of the respondents recalled that Smythe, "coming into my life at this time, he came with influence and a good deal of stimulus too."¹¹ In the latter months of 1890, those he had attracted met in private homes to study and discuss Theosophy.

In those years as few as five members could charter a branch of the Theosophical Society, and Smythe quickly attracted twice that many. And so, on January 22, 1891, he was at last able to write to the General Secretary in New York:

At a meeting of Toronto Theosophists and "enquirers" called by Mrs. E.D. MacPherson and held last evening at Mrs. Dr. Stowe's it was agreed to proceed with the organisation of a Branch in this City.

I think there is a good prospect of useful activity for a branch here, and the ten or twelve more directly interested are sure to increase their numbers soon.¹²

The necessary formalities having been completed, the Toronto Theosophical Society received its charter, dated February 25, 1891. It was one of the last to be

⁹Conn Smythe, *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰Official Register. Archives, Theosophical Society (Pasadena). His membership was recommended by William Q. Judge, who issued the diploma on October 16, 1889.

¹¹Algernon Blackwood, *Episodes Before Thirty* (1923 ed.), 57.

¹²Smythe, Letter to William Q. Judge, 22 January 1891. Archives, Theosophical Society (International) Pasadena.

signed by H.P. Blavatsky, who died on May 8 that year. In addition to Smythe, the members named on the charter were Algernon Blackwood, [Mary] E. Day MacPherson, Emily Stowe and Augusta Stowe Gullen. Smythe was elected as the branch's first President. Over the ensuing months it was increasingly active, thanks to him and a few other enthusiasts. The meetings continued to be held in the homes of members.

1891 was also a significant year in Smythe's family life. Adding to the satisfaction of establishing a Theosophical branch in his city was his joy over the birth of his first child. Like her mother, she was named Mary.

He continued to write poetry, a practice he continued until the end of his life. A selection of his early work, some of which had appeared in newspapers and magazines, was published in 1891 with the title *Poems Grave and Gay*. This first collection received a very favourable review in *Toronto Saturday Night*. The following year his Theosophical activities consumed more and more of his time. He gave public lectures and conducted classes, as well as handling correspondence. One of the classes was a Sunday study group on *The Secret Doctrine*, Madame Blavatsky's *magnum opus*, and this activity of the Toronto branch continued through good times and bad for more than eighty years. That year too, Smythe applied for, and was accepted as a probationer in the Eastern School of Theosophy, formerly known as the Esoteric Section, which William Q. Judge headed in America. Both organizations were commonly referred to by the initials E.S.T., and even more commonly, simply E.S. Albert E.S. Smythe's admission certificate, signed by Annie Besant and William Q. Judge, joint Heads of the E.S.T, is dated 16th December, 1892. Shortly after, he formed an E.S.T. Lodge in Toronto which he named "Moira." In those years, applicants to join the E.S. were required to honour a seven-part pledge which Smythe later summarized, presumably for his own purposes:

We have pledged ourselves to the Higher Self, to maintain a constant struggle against our lower nature; to be charitable to the weaknesses of others; to fit ourselves to teach and help others, and particularly to help the Theosophical Movement and the Brotherhood of Man, to which we declare our devotion, and we reaffirm all the particulars of the pledges we have signed in this School. To which we call the Higher Self to witness.

From all that is known about this man, it is evident he honoured this pledge throughout his long life.

After three years, Smythe stepped down from the Presidency of the Toronto T.S. and took on the office of Corresponding Secretary. As the program of the Toronto T.S. expanded, more demands were made on his time, both as a study group leader and public lecturer. He became adept in both roles, and practised them until the last year of his life. Around this time he also began writing short Theosophical articles: the earliest that has been identified was titled "A Note on Reincarnation," which was published in the March, 1894 issue of William Q. Judge's magazine *The Path*.

A step forward to what would develop into a distinguished editorial career was taken in August, 1894, with Volume I, No. 1 of the first Theosophical magazine to be

published in Canada, *The Lamp*.¹³ Smythe was its unpaid editor and, except for the first three issues, was also its publisher, although it was largely financed by another Toronto Theosophist, Samuel Beckett.

The Lamp appeared monthly for 30 consecutive issues in its first phase. As well as editorials and a wide range of editorial notes, two regular features written by the Editor himself were titled “Scripture Class Notes” and “International S[unday] S[chool] Lessons” respectively. These consisted of learned commentaries on the Old and New Testaments, leaning heavily on his familiarity with the Greek text of the latter. These items were in connection with one of the classes he ran for several years as part of the Toronto TS program. But *The Lamp* was by no means a personal vehicle for Smythe: it contained a variety of Theosophical articles by various authors from all over America.

From the beginning, *The Lamp* had what today seems an incredibly large press run. An official notice in the first issue, and repeated subsequently, reads:

We issue 5000 copies of *The Lamp*, and intend to distribute them monthly in one of several districts into which we have divided Toronto.

If you get a *Lamp* this month it may be some months before you see one again, as we will go over all the other sections before we return to yours.¹⁴

Then followed an invitation to subscribe. At only 25 cents per year it must have been a bargain even in those times, for each monthly issue ran to 16 pages. Its contents were invariably interesting, and read well even more than a century after their publication. Many members and friends must have put their shoulders behind this ambitious effort to distribute the magazine. The writer recalls an old Toronto member—young and eager in the 1890s—telling him how she and others would get together when it came off the press each month, divide up the copies, and go around delivering them door to door. This attempt to propagate Theosophy must have borne fruit because membership in the Toronto T.S. gradually increased. In February, 1895, Smythe’s son Conn was born. Although their personalities were very different they were close and affectionate. (Conn is the subject of a separate profile in this series.)

That same year, the whole Theosophical Society was in crisis, but especially so on the American continent. An affair known as “The Judge Case” developed into a bitter dispute which eventually split the organization.¹⁵ William Q. Judge was the victim of false accusations originating mostly in England and India. Annie Besant, one of the accusers, tried desperately to have Judge censured, but in America at least, his followers were in the vast majority. The outcome was that at the Annual Convention, the members voted to establish an independent Theosophical Society in America. Smythe, as one of the delegates of the Toronto Branch, was in attendance. He was then, as in the past and ever after a strong Judge supporter. After the Convention, a few of the branch members changed their minds about belonging to the newly formed

¹³A complete set of *The Lamp* (four volumes) was reprinted, with cumulative index, by the Edmonton Theosophical Society in 1987.

¹⁴“Plan of Publication”. *The Lamp* 1: 1 (Aug 1894) p. 16.

¹⁵An exhaustive analysis of the Judge Case, by Ernest E. Pelletier, has been published by the Edmonton Theosophical Society.

organization. The end result was that a minority switched their loyalties to Besant, and retained the Toronto T.S. charter, while the rest, including Smythe, transferred their membership to the pro-Judge organization. They, the majority, formed a new branch in Toronto, known appropriately as the BeaverTS.

Sadly, Mr. Judge died in March, 1896. A month later, in the Convention which Smythe attended, the American members unanimously elected Ernest T. Hargrove as President of the Theosophical Society in America. However, from the time of Judge's death, Katherine A. Tingley was the *de facto* leader, as well as being the "Outer Head" of the Esoteric Section (E.S.), which position she assumed after Judge's death, and which gave her extraordinary powers. She was also a brilliant organizer, as evidenced by the fact that on extremely short notice she arranged a world tour involving herself and several other prominent American and European Theosophists. Her "Crusade", as it was called, left New York in June, bound first for Europe. This was only two months after the Convention, during which she had kept a relatively low profile. The "Crusade" is not even mentioned in the detailed Proceedings of the Convention. Even earlier, as reported in those Proceedings, she was already planning her School for the Revival of the Lost Mysteries of Antiquity.

Smythe worked hard for the new organization. In addition to his activities with the new Beaver T.S., he frequently lectured in Hamilton and Buffalo. Much in demand, he was soon sent out on lecture tours throughout the eastern and central States. How he found time to fit in these engagements with his other commitments and responsibilities can only be guessed. It is known, however, that his frequent and lengthy absences from Toronto exacerbated problems at home. His wife even wrote to President Hargrove expressing how disturbed she was. He replied that it was impossible for him to interfere in any way between husband and wife. He did, however, confidentially inform Smythe of this correspondence.

A typical tour undertaken between November 16 and December 5, 1896 took in 12 American cities. An interesting sidelight of this period is that while lecturing in Syracuse, he was admitted to the Onondaga tribe of Indians by the name of O-ake-wah-de-he.¹⁶ He was very sympathetic to the plight of First Nations peoples. He later said that he had written many editorials in the newspapers with which he was connected, regarding the Six Nations, and especially on the necessity and justice of observing the treaties made with them.

Nor were his tours limited to lecturing. As a second degree Councillor (a fairly high office) in the E.S., on his lecture tours he was also required to conduct E.S. meetings in most of the Theosophical centres he visited. (As mentioned, Mrs. Tingley was in charge of the E.S. now known as the Esoteric *School*.) Incidentally, second degree officers were each identified with a symbol, probably self-chosen, and Smythe's was a pentagram, the five-pointed star representing man the microcosm and associated with health.

Smythe's literary activities in this period were not confined to *The Lamp*. For example, the Toronto *Mail & Empire* November 14, 1896 Saturday edition contained a lengthy article "Theosophy:" signed by him. It appeared in the centre of the front page of the second section, a position which no reader could miss, and suggests he may already have been friendly with editors of various Toronto daily papers.

¹⁶[Smythe] See his Note. CT 18: 107. Also Obituary, *Hamilton Spectator*, October 2, 1947.

Certainly, an angry anti-Theosophical response, published the following Saturday was relegated to an inside page! His article is of historical importance, because it clearly shows that at this time Albert and presumably all his fellow Beaver TS members accepted Mrs. Tingley's leadership without question.

All this work was but the prologue to several difficult years for him. An editorial note in the January, 1897 issue of *The Lamp* stated that while its circulation was not large enough to sustain itself, it was too large for Smythe to handle by himself. He apologized for publication delays caused by his absence on the Theosophical lecture circuit, and intimated that after the April issue the magazine would "hand its subscription list to one of its able contemporaries so as to complete its own obligations and 'leave more room for others.'" In the even, the January issue was the last number to appear for more than two years.

His repeated absences from the city took their toll on his family, health and business. The building supply firm apparently folded around this time. Another lecture tour began on January 20, but it would be the last for some time. In the March 8, 1897 issue of *The Theosophical News* appeared this announcement :

When Mr. Smythe returned from his last lecture tour he was too ill to resume his work, and has ever since been confined to bed. He is still very ill.

A month later the same paper was able to report he was recovering, and indeed on April 1, 1897, he felt well enough to open a public meeting attended by over 2,000 to welcome Mrs. Tingley and some of her Crusaders. At this time, his theosophical activities were mostly confined to Toronto, although he contributed reviews to *Theosophy* (successor to *The Path*, the journal of the Theosophical Society in America). But in the October number, an editorial note announced "The non-appearance of *The Literary World* [the title of his contributions] is accounted for by Mr. A.E.S. Smythe's temporary absence in Europe."¹⁷ By his own account, early in 1897 he had suffered a breakdown, and his physician ordered a sea voyage to restore his health. Short of funds, in June that year he was enabled to sail to Ireland "on a trading steamer thanks to the generosity of the husband of a Toronto TS member." In all he was absent from Toronto for a year and a half. There is no mention of his wife and children going with him.

While recuperating in Ireland, he continued to serve the Theosophical cause as best he could. He corresponded with Mrs. Tingley, and was evidently still in accord with her policies. Two of her replies to his letters are extant. In one letter, typed on Esoteric School of Theosophy letterhead she told "Dear Brother Smythe" she was glad he was safe in Ireland, "but for the sake of the work in America, I cannot say I hope you will stay long." In another she wrote, ". . . your letters always bring a fresh breeze to the tired old lady." In the latter she twice referred to him as "son". One wonders how he reacted to this familiarity: in 1897, she was 50, he 36 years of age.

This convalescent period in Smythe's life did however include some treasured moments. Among these were memorable visits to the Dublin Theosophical Society in 1898. There he met the elite of the Irish literary revival, including Æ (George W. Russell) and Violet North—later Mrs. Russell, W.B. Yeats, John Todhunter, Annie

¹⁷*Theosophy* 12: 7 (October 1897), 383.

and Fred Dick, Daniel N. Dunlop, Paul Gregan and Kenneth Morris among several others. It remained a strong memory and in an obituary for Russell 37 years later he recalled:

In 1898 I was in Dublin and had the opportunity on many occasions of meeting most of these, both at the headquarters, just then transferred to Eustace Street from Ely Place, and had also the sad experience of seeing the last of those lovely and unique creations of Russell's artistic genius and occult knowledge which decorated the walls of the Ely Place rooms, which were being dismantled and in the hands of masons and plasterers who were busy destroying these priceless tokens of a new age.¹⁸

Other than this, practically nothing is known of his activities in Ireland in 1898, but it is safe to assume his Theosophical interests had not waned. He continued to write a little: in Mrs. Tingley's *Universal Brotherhood* magazine for August an enigmatic story of his, "Four, Three, Two and One" was published in the "Young Folks' Department".

In 1898 the organization suffered through yet another crisis. He wryly observed that during the 18 months of his sojourn in Ireland, ". . . all sorts of things happened to the Theosophical Society in America." The Tingley-Hargrove leadership partnership began to unravel when the latter resigned as President of the Society and as Editor of *Theosophy* magazine, and Mrs. Tingley took over full control. Having failed to sway the 1898 Convention to his views, Hargrove and his loyal followers split away as a group, although continuing to use the organization's original name, The Theosophical Society in America. Meanwhile, Mrs. Tingley to all intents and purposes was changing the title of *her* organization to the Universal Brotherhood. If there was no quarrel over the name, there was agreement on little else. A long letter from a friend, Mary Folger Lang, who had attended 1898 Convention, persuaded Smythe to continue his allegiance to what was now the Universal Brotherhood organization. Also, he was probably influenced by his fellow Irish Theosophists who for the time being remained in Mrs. Tingley's court. It is difficult to know why he did not look into the matter more deeply, especially because by the time he returned to Canada Mrs. Lang and her husband had already changed their minds and left the Universal Brotherhood. He would surely have felt that they and others who had followed Hargrove were kindred souls and he would have felt comfortable in *their* Theosophical Society. Perhaps had he been in America and attended the Convention, he would have allied himself with them right away. In the light of what happened less than a year later, he must have realized his mistake in following his friend's advice without further investigation. Typically, though, as long as he was in the Tingley organization, he was faithful to its cause, and worked hard for it.

Evidently in much better health, Albert returned to America in December, 1898 and almost immediately threw himself into the same Theosophical activities he had left off eighteen months earlier. Right away, he was commissioned by Mrs. Tingley to make a coast to coast lecture tour of the United States and Canada. So it was that in January, 1899 he began his lengthy journey by visiting Universal Brotherhood branches in the New England States. On the west coast, the itinerary also included

¹⁸[Smythe], "George William Russell—Æ" *CT* 16: 6 (August 1935), 173.

Victoria, British Columbia, where the Kshanti TS, chartered in 1892 and the second oldest Theosophical branch in Canada, was still active and loyal to Mrs. Tingley's organization. The tour completed, Smythe went to her headquarters at Point Loma, on the outskirts of San Diego, to attend the Annual Convention in April.

Dark clouds overhang that event. Smythe recalled:

I had been given *carte blanche* by Mrs. Tingley when I was sent out to lecture all over the United States prior to the Convention at Point Loma in 1899, but when I arrived at Point Loma I was treated as a traitor and "black magician" and Mrs. Tingley herself warned me against every member on her staff as enemies of mine who, she said, had abused me behind my back and told her the most scandalous things about me. Of course I did not believe this, but as she told them the same kind of stories about me and they believed her . . .¹⁹

It was writing on the wall. Disappointed, once back in Toronto he nevertheless continued his Theosophical lecturing and other activities for the Beaver T.S. However, he was no longer a travelling lecturer and seemed to be *persona non grata* at the Point Loma headquarters. What actually happened in the Summer months of 1899 is unclear, and making allowance for personal bias, Smythe's explanation has to be accepted unless and until other evidence comes forward. Nearly thirty years after the event, following the death of Katherine Tingley, he wrote:

With Mr. D.N. Dunlop I was expelled from the Universal Brotherhood in 1899, and Mrs. Tingley's magazine of that year contained the prophecy that I would be either dead or insane in a year . . . We were expelled as not being available tools for what she wanted to do.²⁰

As far as the writer knows, no reasons for these "expulsions" were ever revealed by Katherine Tingley.

Surprisingly, while this crisis was only simmering, Smythe restarted publication of *The Lamp*. The resuscitation of his magazine was unique in that he decided to continue Volume III exactly from where it had stopped at No. 6 in January 1897. And so Vol. III No. 7 is dated September, 1899. As far as the magazine was concerned, it was as if the previous two and a half years had never existed. With exactly the same format, a casual reader thumbing through this bound volume would hardly realize the lengthy hiatus.

Perhaps the fact that Smythe had restarted his magazine brought matters to a boil. Mrs. Tingley was unlikely to tolerate in her organization an independent journal over which she had no control. Undoubtedly she took objection to the following editorial comment in the October issue:

. . . My attention has been drawn to the fact that in a recent copy of the *Universal Brotherhood Magazine* the name of the Leader and Official Head appears over one hundred times, and in the *New Century* a similar course is followed, and I am asked why I do not follow these models. I do not think Mrs. Tingley should be held responsible for the actions of her

¹⁹[Smythe], "Digging Up Old Bones" *CT* 20: 8 (October 1939), 225. See also *CT* 10: 6 (August 1929), 182; *CT* 16: 2 (April 1935), 57; *CT* 5: 35 (July 1935), 141; *CT* 18:3 (May 1937), 83.

²⁰Smythe, "Death of Mrs. Tingley" *CT* 10: 6 (August 1929), 182.

sub-editors in this respect, but because *The Lamp* presents somewhat of a contrast to such lip-service, and gives itself to the exposition of the principles and philosophy for which the Leader and Official Head stands before the public, and to which she has declared her life devoted, and it scarcely seems a reason why I should be declared “off,” or disloyal, or that I am posing as a guru, and all the rest of the pitiful trash which occurs to unbrotherly and suspicious minds.²¹

In the December, 1899 issue of *The Lamp* the name of D.N. Dunlop (1868-1935) appeared on the masthead as “Associate Editor, London, England.” Because of the distance between them this was probably a nominal title only, although contributions from Dunlop and his wife Edith appeared occasionally. Dunlop was well experienced having earlier edited *The Irish Theosophist*. In March, 1900, Volume IV of *The Lamp* came out in a new, more attractive format, and was expanded to 32 pages per issue. It was a worthy Theosophical periodical, but unfortunately, it folded after the September 1900 issue, apparently due to lack of funds.

There is an epilogue to the history of *The Lamp*, which reveals a lot about Smythe’s character. It takes the form of a reminiscence in his son Conn’s Memoirs. When Conn was starting in business, he urgently needed some printing done, and without knowing went to the same firm that had printed the last issues of *The Lamp*. As a first time customer at the printing shop it seemed unlikely he would be given credit there until the appearance at the desk of one of the partners. Once the family connection was established there was no problem: the partner remembered that Albert had insisted on paying off the debt in full, many years after the firm had written it off.²²

Unfortunately for the Theosophical movement in Canada, after the demise of *The Lamp*, twenty years elapsed before the appearance of another Canadian Theosophical journal, *The Canadian Theosophist*. It too was edited by Albert E.S. Smythe.

In his personal life, as the nineteenth century drew to a close Smythe’s fortunes were at rock bottom. Broke and out of work, with two children to raise and an incompatible wife who was prone to alcoholism to support, he must have felt sorely depressed. Certainly it was a most difficult phase of Albert’s life. But Theosophical principles were embedded in his character, and he bore his lot without complaint.

In 1900, once again the indigent Smythe was indebted to an anonymous Theosophical friend who helped him to overcome his poverty. The help came in the form of a rent-free dwelling in what was then the Village of Scarborough, now part of Metropolitan Toronto. By this arrangement the owner benefitted by having a caretaker for his property which included other vacant buildings. It was by no means luxury living: no electricity, water from a pump outside the house, and an outdoor toilet. But it meant survival and, however lowly, a place to call home for his children. In all, Albert lived there with son and daughter for about four years. At last he was able to put down roots and pursue a permanent career which had been retarded during the previous ten years because of the time he had spent on behalf of Theosophy. Mary, his first child, lived with them during this time, after her mother was no longer capable of looking after her. Tragically, she died unexpectedly on May 22, 1903 when she was

²¹*The Lamp* 3: 8 (October 1899), 125.

²²See Conn Smythe, *If You Can’t Beat Them in the Alley*, 78.

only twelve years old. Her father loved her deeply, and his grief over her passing never dimmed—he was still talking about her near the end of his long life. A little more than three years later his wife Polly died, but Albert never wrote either of her life or death.

No longer a member of Mrs. Tingley's Universal Brotherhood, he was also uncharitably, not to say untheosophically refused re-entry into the Theosophical Society (Adyar). But the Theo-sophical Movement has always been much greater than the sum of its parts and enrolled or not in any one of them Albert would have remained true to the ideals of its Founders. The force of circumstances had meant he had already held memberships in three organizations and now his association with the Movement continued almost without pause as he joined a fourth: the unaffiliated and independent Theosophical Society in America based in New York. As previously mentioned, this organization had been set up in 1898 following the secession of Ernest Hargrove and several other prominent Theosophists from Mrs. Tingley's group. Several of his Toronto friends also joined this organization—some while also retaining membership in the Adyar Society. No records have been uncovered, but there was certainly a Toronto branch of *this* Theosophical Society in America, and Smythe is known to have been active in it throughout most of the first decade of the 20th century. As if he had blocked it from his memory, in later years he never once mentioned this activity. Inexplicably he went so far as to state that “he was during this period outside the organized Societies.”²³ Nevertheless, he attended the Annual Meetings of this Theosophical Society in New York City, representing its Toronto branch, and in 1905 and 1906 he was elected to the Executive Committee. A short speech made at the 1905 Annual Convention, as reported in the Society's *Theosophical Quarterly* left no doubt that, regardless of organization Smythe held firm to Theosophical principles and spoke of brotherhood as the essential feature of the movement:

He had endeavoured, he said, to maintain the mental attitude of paying no attention to artificially constituted limits or boundaries. They existed not as a means of separation, but as aids to attainments, and those who regarded them otherwise were not fulfilling the law of love. He declined to adopt a policy of exclusiveness with regard to workers in any cause for the benefit of humanity.²⁴

This was no doubt aimed at those in the organization who stood aloof from fraternizing with other Theosophical Societies. Nevertheless, Smythe no doubt enjoyed the company of his fellow students of Theosophy in this organization. They included such brilliant minds as Henry Bedinger Mitchell and the linguist Charles Johnston. There was, however, a point of friction between them: when he applied for admission into this Society's E.S. his previous seniority in that body was not recognized.

It seemed inevitable that Smythe's interests and writing skills would ultimately lead to a professional career in journalism. A capsule biography published in 1898, either written by him in the third person, or based on information he provided, states that he was formerly engaged in journalism for some years in Belfast, Chicago and

²³Smythe, “Heresy Hunts” *CT* 8: 5 (July 1927), 101.

²⁴*The Theosophical Quarterly*, 3: 1 (July 1905), 272.

Toronto. In view of his known occupations in these cities, however, his newspaper activities were probably mostly part time. He never elaborated on the nature of his employment in Chicago, but it is a reasonable supposition that working for publisher A.C. McClurg would have required related expertise, useful for the future. Certainly, on the evidence shown in *The Canadian Theosophist* he was a proofreader *par excellence*: some of his book reviews in that journal even included remarks on the number of typos he noticed while reading! What is known of the years in Edinburgh does not suggest he had either time or opportunity for journalism there. These finally opened up for him in Toronto, his business providing the opportunity for flexible hours. He said that in 1890 he frequented the company of the talented writers in the office of *Saturday Night* magazine, so it is likely he engaged in late hour part time editorial work there. His attendance at the Shorthand Convention around that time suggests that along the way he had picked up this particular skill, which in the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries was indispensable for reporters. Theosophical writing and editing during the 1890s had provided experience while adding nothing to his income. So his entrance into the journalistic profession on a full time basis may be said to have begun on the eve of the 20th century when he became a writer for one of the Toronto papers. At last he was earning a living in a field he loved, while pursuing what he saw as the serious purpose of his life, Theosophy.

It was not until 1903, however, when he was past 40, that he joined the editorial staff of the *Toronto World* on a permanent basis. It was a hectic though interesting phase of his life, in which Theosophy was never absent. He recalled that on Saturday nights in the editorial offices, “. . . a number of young university men used to assemble and talk philosophy and theosophy. . . The discussions would last until three or four o’clock in the morning.” Two years later he moved to the Toronto *Globe*. Although his career in journalism had really only begun in earnest in 1901, it took only a few years before his abilities became well known in Toronto newspaper circles, and his services were in demand. For instance, in 1942 he recalled:

About 35 years ago I was offered and urged to accept the financial editorship of one of the biggest papers in Canada, a position it still holds. I declined it, for I knew enough of the financial system to know that I would not be permitted to tell the truth about finance as I saw it.²⁵

Throughout his long career he was constantly faithful to the journalistic ethics reflected in that quotation. But it was not the only offer he received and he returned to the *World* in 1907 as editor-in-chief, a position he held until 1920. If belated, it was a meteoric rise in the profession. It says a lot about the respect he was afforded by his peers that he was elected President of the Toronto Press Club in 1907.

In August 1907, Smythe was once again in Europe. In an effort to increase circulation in Toronto’s then highly competitive newspaper world his employer ran a competition, the prize of which was a trip to London and Paris for a dozen local women selected by ballot. He was assigned as one of the escorts for this group which the *World* dubbed “Maple Blossoms”.

While in England with them he evidently found sufficient time to spend with old friends including Andrew Petrie Cattanach and Charles Oliver, companions in

²⁵[Smythe] “Money” *CT* 22: 12 (February 1942), 353.

Edinburgh nearly twenty years earlier. His personal agenda on this trip also included a self-devised mission for Theosophy. “I attempted,” he wrote, “to bring about a rapprochement among various elements [of the Theosophical Movement] that had branched off.” To this end, in London he approached some of the prominent Theosophists of the day to press his case. These included Archibald Keightley (1859-1930), who represented the European wing of the Hargrove TS in America; George R.S. Mead (1863-1933), who at this time had just left the AdyarTS to form the Quest Society; and Annie Besant, who only weeks earlier had been elected President of the Theosophical Society (Adyar) following the death of the President-Founder, Col. Henry S. Olcott. Nothing came of this ambitious attempt at reunification., partly due to the isolationist policy of the very organization he belonged to—the Theosophical Society in America.

Smythe came away from his lengthy interview with Mrs. Besant in London, convinced she had changed her attitude and would start to put the TS back on its originally intended path. He described the meeting with Besant thus: “. . . I outlined my views to her. She agreed that we could both work for Theosophy though disagreeing on some points.”²⁶ Based on this understanding and with her concurrence, he rejoined the Theosophical Society (Adyar) through the Toronto TS. But it turned out to be a *mis*understanding: regrettably, Mrs. Besant not only failed to introduce reform, but as time went on led the Society even farther away from its intended purpose. Although disappointed, Smythe remained in her organization, and for the rest of his life did his utmost to ensure that Canada in general and Toronto in particular would have a Theosophical Society, one that lived up to the ideals of its founders. Sad to say, in some other parts of the Theosophical world the Society was not always represented with such loyalty to principle.

The following year he made another transAtlantic journey, this time taking his 13 year old son with him. For Conn, it was an opportunity to meet family members for the first time: in England, his mother’s sister and other relatives welcomed him; in Ireland he was introduced to his paternal grandfather. This homecoming must have given much satisfaction to Albert.

If writing editorials six days a week for the *Toronto World* wasn’t enough challenge to him, in 1910 he began writing for the Sunday edition, a feature which greatly enhanced the Theosophical cause in Toronto and beyond. More than thirty years later, he recalled:

. . . the then editor of the *Toronto Sunday World* asked me if I would write something for his columns. I consented on condition that I could say what I liked. And it was to be a free contribution. I wrote two columns a week for twelve years under the heading “Crusts and Crumbs”²⁷

Over six hundred “Crusts and Crumbs” were written over the byline Albert Ernest Stafford, a pseudonym which barely hid the identity of the writer. The articles covered a wide range of subjects, reflecting the author’s wide interests and knowledge. The

²⁶Smythe, “Presidential Election” *CT* 14: 10 (Dec 1933), 309. See also “The Theosophical World Congress” *CT* 10: 7 (Sep 1929), 206.

²⁷Smythe “All Life is a Unity” *CT* Supplement, October 1944, 24.

subjects included literature, religion, philosophy and art, Theosophy and Theosophical history. The American poet Walt Whitman was frequently mentioned. Occasionally he would reminisce about his boyhood in Ireland. There was seldom a hint of Canadian politics, which anyway found an outlet in his own daily editorials, though on occasion he made passing reference to Irish affairs. A few of the columns took the form of book reviews; and others were in response to correspondents' questions or arguments. In short, he used "Crusts and Crumbs" as an outlet for a variety of propaganda, including, without hint of proselytism, Theosophy. It was a daring experiment that succeeded, perhaps beyond even his own expectations. Well written, these Sunday opinion pieces can be read with pleasure nearly a century after they were first published.

The full page length two-column articles could be from 2,000 to 2,500 words long, and this was on top of all the other editorial tasks and writing in which he was engaged. It is said that the *only* issue over that long period in which the column failed to appear was when he was in Ireland (probably in 1912), and his copy was delayed in the mail. All in all, it was a remarkable achievement by any journalistic standard. Nowhere on the continent, or indeed anywhere in the world did Theosophy regularly enjoy such favourable media exposure as through Smythe's "Crusts and Crumbs". These articles led many a reader to meetings of the Toronto and Hamilton Theosophical Societies.

This long run only came to an end when stopped by Harry Smith, the then editor of the Sunday edition, in 1920. Inasmuch as the cancellation would not have been a question of economy, since no payment was ever made for the column, it is a reasonable inference that Mr Smith did not favour free expression when it opposed his views. Alas, of the hundreds of columns that appeared in the *Sunday World*, only a fraction have been preserved. However, Smythe did occasionally continue to use the title "Crusts and Crumbs" for shorter articles he wrote for the *Toronto Theosophical News* in the 1920s.

The World War which would commence in 1914 was already casting its shadow before. In 1912, when on a walking tour in England, Scotland and Wales, Albert was "struck with the resemblance between the state of affairs there at that time and those described by Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*" (referring to the French Revolution). He talked with the lowest paid workers, and the realization of their plight was an undoubted influence on his thinking in the years that followed.

It was in the same year, on September 29, that he married for the second time. His bride was Janie Henderson, whose family lived in County Tyrone, Ireland. Unlike his first, this seems to have been in every respect an ideal marriage. While Janie was not a keen student of Theosophy in the ordinary sense, she became an active member of the Toronto Theosophical Society. She also shared some of her husband's other interests, especially the Dickens Fellowship.

There followed several years of stability in Albert's life, a condition he had seldom enjoyed since he first left Ireland. But the first World War presented worries as it did to so many families. His son Conn quit university to join the Canadian Army, and went overseas in early 1916. On the eve of his departure, his father wrote a loving letter which reveals how close was their relationship. It is also an exposition of his

practical Theosophical philosophy. Conn preserved the letter all his life and shared it with the world in his autobiography.²⁸

Long an admirer of Walt Whitman, Smythe was one of the founders and active members of the Whitman Fellowship in Canada. In 1916 Albert was elected its first President and gave the Inaugural Address. Flora MacDonald Denison, a fellow Whitmanite wrote an appreciation of him, listing his many qualities. She called him a teacher who was a poet, philosopher and orator, “pre-eminently in the advance guard of our social life and is an especially valuable citizen.”

After rejoining the Toronto Theosophical Society in 1907, his inspiration and leadership helped it flourish like no other branch on the American continent. Its program was enhanced with regular lectures and classes, in both of which Smythe was very active, and membership again began to increase. He became President again in 1917, the office to which he was elected at the branch’s very first meeting in 1891. He remained in that office until 1939 and as a member until his death. The Toronto TS grew until it was one of the largest branches on the continent, and across the country more and more branches were formed.

During the war years he continued to be extraordinarily busy, but somehow managed to balance all his interests. Anchored by steady employment in work he enjoyed—although the *World* had a reputation for tardiness in paying employee’s salaries—he spent many hours a week lecturing and conducting classes for the Toronto TS, and took active roles in other organizations.

Janie and Albert’s only child, a daughter they named Moira, was born in February, 1918. Moira is a Celtic variation of Mary, which was the name of his short-lived first daughter. The name must have had a special significance for Albert because as previously mentioned, around 1892 he had given the title of “Moira” to his Lodge of the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society.

Throughout the first two decades of the 20th century, Canadian members and branches still came under the jurisdiction of the American Section of the Theosophical Society (Adyar). Intermittently during this period there had been sporadic agitation for Canadian national autonomy within the Society, and finally in November, 1919 The Theosophical Society in Canada was chartered.²⁹ Although he supported the cause, Smythe himself had taken little part in the campaign for independence, but when national elections were held to determine the composition of the first governing body (General Executive), he was acclaimed General Secretary (equivalent of President). Within months, a magazine, *The Canadian Theosophist* was started in March 1920 with Smythe as editor.

While Theosophy occupied much of his time, his vocation continued albeit with radical changes. In 1921 his employment with the *Toronto World* terminated, the paper to which he had been Chief Editor for the previous thirteen years. As mentioned there was evidently a disagreement between him and the publisher regarding editorial freedom; in any case, due to incompetent management the paper was already in dire straits and it folded shortly after he left.

There followed several difficult years. One who knew him well at this time corroborated the intensity of this problem period:

²⁸Conn Smythe, *If You Can’t Beat Them in the Alley*, 39-40.

²⁹This event is related in the chapter titled “The Winding Road to Canadian Autonomy.”

Then he was taken into another organization which was also unfortunate enough to go out of business. Then came several months of struggle in which he was doing practically nothing, but like the proverbial camel was living “off his hump” and pretty hard going it was too. He was offered positions out of the city but he refused, preferring to grub along as best he could so as not to break his T.S. work or connection. His fortitude and sacrifice were a revelation to me being as I was a close associate of his. Then through a T.S. member in Hamilton he got a job on a Hamilton paper but which is only a poor job as compared with his editorial ability. This job just keeps him in existence but he is plugging along and trying to keep going. I know personally he has just refused a good job in another place but he has refused it also, again preferring to stick to the T.S. He is working night and day at his job and T.S. work . . . he is a pattern that many of our Theosophists might well copy.³⁰

In July, 1921 he admitted to a correspondent that he had been out of work for three months; and this state of affairs continued until October when he wrote:

I have recently got a job writing a daily column for a newspaper and it is a pretty steady grind and with all our local [TS] work I am “fair put to it.”³¹

The newspaper was the *Toronto Star*, where Smythe’s previous status was of no account to the publisher. According to Gordon Sinclair, a fellow journalist who remembered him at this time, Albert Smythe was “. . . an old time journalist with a droopy mustache and a big watch chain. He wore wing collars and wrote scholarly prose at a time when scholarly prose was only for the book page, so as a newspaperman he sometimes didn’t get along well.”³² Photographs of Smythe taken at various times from the 1890s through to his later years confirm the mustache, wing collar and watch chain as being his unchanged clothing style.

The early 1920s were particularly troublesome years for the Theosophical Society as a whole, and especially for the Canadian Section. In his role as General Secretary Smythe had to deal with a major disaffection of Canadian members, mostly in Vancouver. The crisis led to some branches and members pulling out of the Theosophical Society in Canada.³³ In this dispute he was the chief spokesperson for the TS in Canada and how he dealt with it without sacrificing principles is admirable.

Of the scores of Theosophical magazines published around the world at that time, few had the benefit of an experienced Editor. Fewer still allowed such diverse opinions to be aired as did *The Canadian Theosophist* and this freedom of expression was one of the reasons that aggravated the controversy. Except in Canada, the Theosophical Society as a whole no longer embraced the ideals of the Founders: the

³⁰H[arry] R. Tallman. Letter to Catherine Menzies, February 10, 1922. Vancouver TS Archives.

³¹Albert E.S. Smythe, Letter to Catherine Menzies, October 20, 1921. Vancouver TS Archives.

³²Gordon Sinclair, *Will Gordon Sinclair Please Sit Down*, 33.

³³This difficult period is described in the chapter headed “The Split”.

majority of members in all other countries tended to hero-worship the contemporary leaders. New “teachings” were promoted at the expense of those of H.P. Blavatsky. In the entire international Society, the Canadian Section magazine was the only one of its kind to allow criticism of those leaders, especially Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater. This raised a furore not only among a minority of Canadian members, but also the defenders of the *status quo* in all other English-speaking countries. In vain were the minority’s persistent efforts to depose Smythe by democratic means; instead they resigned from The Theosophical Society in Canada although not from the Theosophical Society itself. (Details of this dispute may be read in the chapter entitled “The Split”.) Needless to say, this move weakened the Theosophical Cause in Canada, but Smythe stuck to his principles and continued to edit the controversial journal not only through this crisis but also others until just a few months before his death in 1947.

In retrospect, it seems incredible that Smythe managed to accomplish all that he did in the early 1920s. The demands of his daily work would not have allowed him much spare time, and unquestionably he devoted many hours a week to the Theosophical Society, lecturing and conducting study classes. But in addition he was committed to other voluntary activities. To take the year 1922 as an example, as well as earning his living writing a daily newspaper column, he was:

- President, Toronto Theosophical Society.
- General Secretary (equivalent President) Theosophical Society in Canada.
- President, Toronto Branch of the Dickens Fellowship.
- President, Toronto Branch of the Walt Whitman Fellowship.
- President, Ontario Social Hygiene Council.

In addition, he edited *The Canadian Theosophist* (a monthly journal) and probably gave at least one Theosophical lecture every month.

In 1923, thirty-two years after his first book of poetry was published there appeared a new collection entitled *The Garden of the Sun*. This was selected as one of the 500 books representing Canadian literature at the British Empire Exhibition in London. That year also, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts; and in 1924 he was elected Vice-President of the international Dickens Fellowship.

After years of making his living writing editorials for Toronto and Hamilton newspapers, in 1928 he was offered and accepted the editorship of the *Hamilton Herald*. This responsible position was no easy job for one already past retirement age, but he so loved his calling that the decision was probably easy for him to make. However, it necessitated moving to the steel-making city of Hamilton with his family. As when he was editor of the *Toronto World*, the new responsibility barely interrupted his Theosophical activities. He offered his resignation as General Secretary of the Theosophical Society in Canada to the General Executive which sensibly declined to accept it, and year after year until 1940 he continued to be acclaimed in that office. Inasmuch as it only meant changing printers, he continued month after month to single-handedly edit *The Canadian Theosophist* and to organize its mailing. He also continued to be re-elected President of the Toronto TS even though living 40 miles away. He seemed indefatigable.

In April, 1935 as a passenger in a friend's car on a 300-mile trip he was involved in an accident. The car was being driven slowly on a rainy-snowy day, and skidded. He suffered a broken collar bone and cuts and contusions to his head, but the injuries healed satisfactorily and quickly.

Every year in the 1930s he conducted various classes for the Hamilton TS. Fortunately we have on record the recollection of life-long Theosophist Sarah Lakin, who attended them when in her early twenties, and who gives a fascinating picture of Smythe in those years. Interviewed by a friend and fellow Theosophist, she recalled how she first met him:

To begin at the beginning. . . for me it was the T.S. meeting at the old Templar Hall in Hamilton in 1934, when Albert E.S. Smythe was giving a lecture on Higher and Lower Manas. Of course the concept was entirely new to me, and I had never heard Sanskrit before, yet I understood every word: and looking around at the great bookcases housing hundreds of books, it felt just like "coming home." Someone suggested introducing me to Mr. Smythe and then there I was standing on the platform with knees trembling looking up at the tall Irishman with the gold hair and blue twinkling eyes, who said to me, "You're just remembering old knowledge" [he said].

Sarah, then looks back on "a truly exciting period" during which she could hardly wait for the weekly class night. The classes were held in the Smythes' apartment:

. . . and I remember so well the huge room with the great desk at the end, completely covered in seeming chaos with papers and books stacked a foot high with numerous markers sticking out; and in the middle of talking he could go over and pull out just what he needed without a hitch in the sentence. On one occasion I was amused to hear him giving his daughter a horrendous dressing down for "tidying" up his desk.³⁴

His position with the *Herald* lasted until 1934. Even that was not the end of his journalistic career: at least as late as 1938 at the age of 76 he was still writing editorials for the *Hamilton Spectator*. When World War 2 broke out, Smythe wrote a monthly editorial in *The Canadian Theosophist* on "The War", calling into play his vast editorial experience and attesting to his continuing unique knowledge of current events.

In view of his age and physical problems, in 1939 Smythe wisely stepped down from the Presidency of the Toronto Theosophical Society, the Lodge he had helped formed in 1891, and which he had served as President continuously since 1917. Sadly, he left on a bitter note because of an untheosophical campaign by a Toronto member to slander a visiting Indian scholar. Although she had no proof to back her accusations her calumny was believed by some of the Toronto members. True to form, Smythe would hear none of it, and was later vindicated. This aside, it must be admitted that

³⁴Joan Sutcliffe, "Personal Memories of Early Theosophists," in *Keeping the Link Unbroken: Theosophical Studies Presented to Ted G. Davy on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Michael Gomes, 179,180.

several active Toronto TS workers were tiring of their perennially absentee President, and this was another factor that led to his resignation.

The death of his second wife, Janie, on October 15, 1940, was a devastating blow. Unlike his first marriage this had been a happy one, and his only regret was that Janie and his son Conn were not close in their step-relationship. She was, he wrote, “a bright and faithful spirit who never spared herself in the service of others.” He told a friend:

My wife was singularly gifted in those things that matter little to the world at large but were of immense importance to her intimates and her family. She could have figured in the world but had no desire to push herself forward and was quite satisfied to do what came to her hand in the Dickens Fellowship where she played a great part in social ministrations to those who had no means of rewarding her but with their gratitude and their love.³⁵

Except for his breakdown in 1897, good health had been Smythe’s fortunate lot for nearly all his life. As he entered his ninth decade, however, Parkinson’s disease gradually began to restrict his activities. Because of it, unfortunately, he was unable to attend the Toronto Theosophical Society’s 50th Anniversary celebrations in February, 1941.

These were the years of World War 2, when conditions were not easy to say the least. In early 1942 Albert’s son Conn again donned uniform, this time as a Major, and went off to fight with the Canadian forces in Europe. He returned to Canada, again badly wounded, though his spirits remained high.

At the instigation of Emory P. Wood, President of the Edmonton Lodge, a Supplement to *The Canadian Theosophist* was prepared, and published in October, 1944. It was titled “Commemorating Sixty Years Service by Albert E.S. Smythe in Theosophy 1884-1944,” and contained a lengthy reminiscence by the honoree as well as several pages of tributes from all over the Theosophical world.

In 1945 his health had deteriorated to the point where he felt it necessary to give up the General Secretaryship of the TS in Canada. When this happened, the General Executive wanted to bestow an honorary position on him, but he would have none of it as this report indicates:

The meeting was disappointed in that Mr. Smythe was adamant in refusing to accept the honour of being appointed Hon. General Secretary for Life. He maintained that it would be creating a precedent and was adverse to doing this.³⁶

He did, however retain the editorship of *The Canadian Theosophist* and amazingly, considering his disability, he expertly filled this position for two more years. In all, he served in this capacity for 27 years, a remarkable record.

Continuing to suffer from Parkinson’s Disease, Albert’s physical health steadily deteriorated, although his mind remained as sharp as ever. Some idea of the state of his health in his 84th year may be gathered from his own words:

³⁵Albert E.S. Smythe, Letter to Hildegard Henderson, December 16, 1940. (H.P.B. Library Archives).

³⁶E.L.T[homson] “The General Executive” *CT* 26: 9 (November 1945), 275.

I had a visit a few days ago from two old friends George McMurtrie and Mrs. Roy Mitchell, both of them advised me to give up the editorship in February and I am becoming so feeble that I fear I must accept their advice. I tried to lift a volume of the Secret Doctrine with one hand, but was unable to do so. This will indicate to you how difficult it is for me to carry on any work when my fingers are so powerless that I sometimes have to fumble for minutes before I can get a letter in or out of an envelope. I feel perfectly well, and am merely slowed down to inutility.³⁷

By this time, his signature attests to how the disease had progressed and affected his handwriting. In these circumstances he was fortunate to receive voluntary stenographic help by two members of the Hamilton TS. Prior to this he had always done his own typing. Indicative of his condition at this time is this statement by his successor as General Secretary, Col. E.L. Thomson:

. . . I waited the best part of a year to get his signature for an important document, but he could not make it. His hand had to be held and even then the effort was a failure.³⁸

In the first few months of 1946 he was housebound for weeks, his extremely weak physical condition apparently being obvious to all but himself. In June he made a supreme effort to travel to Toronto for a meeting of the General Executive. In the third person he wrote of this experience:

He received many kind attentions from fellow travellers and from the railway officials. Especially valuable assistance was rendered him by the Traveller's Aid department of the Toronto Union Station.³⁹

Reading between the lines, this admission suggests that at this time, for his own safety he should not have ventured outside his apartment without assistance.

In his 86th year, on October 2, 1947 Albert Ernest Stafford Smythe died after spending two weeks in a Hamilton hospital. Typically, a few days earlier he dictated an article which he had no time to edit and it was his last to be published in *The Canadian Theosophist*. In this brief period, he also began preparing a new collection of his poems. If the body was weak, his mind remained strong until the end.

* * *

This has been an attempt to portray the theosophic life of a brilliant man. It has been difficult to do him justice partly because he was modest to an extreme, but his many accomplishments stand to attest to his rare gifts. A few observations are offered to help understand his personality.

One only has to read a fraction of the articles he wrote in *The Canadian Theosophist* to realize how well he had grasped the Theosophy of H.P. Blavatsky and her teachers. It is a very rewarding study.

³⁷Smythe, Letter to W.B. Pease, November 30, 1945.

³⁸E.L. Thomson, General Secretary. Letter to Norah Livingstone, February 5, 1948.

³⁹[Smythe] "Office Notes" *CT* 27: 5 (July 1946), 144.

Smythe acknowledged his debt to Theosophy, a debt he repaid many times over. In particular, it was the message of H.P. Blavatsky that was to change his life from the 1880s. Of her he wrote:

Personally, she rescued me from a bog of ecclesiasticism, a veritable slough of Despond.⁴⁰

Ever after, despondency was entirely absent from his nature. Few have ever managed to embody Theosophical principles in their daily lives as did Albert Smythe. He took in stride whatever situations his karma put him in, and even seemed grateful for difficult experiences that would have devastated those of weaker character.

One only has to study his life to appreciate how Theosophy can be put into practice and be part of daily life. He considered brotherhood was a fact in nature, and lived accordingly. He once wrote:

I have absolutely no colour prejudice, and all colours, white or black, look alike to me.⁴¹

On one occasion he told Sarah Lakin:

You cannot judge the person by outer coating. Always remember that. The person you see on Skid Row may be a great soul who just had to have that experience to round out his life cycle.⁴²

Although without proof, the writer is convinced Albert Smythe possessed a photographic mind. This, combined with unusual retention for anything he had read, plus writing and shorthand skills, made him an extraordinary editor, both from the technical point of view and the wisdom expressed in his writings. Prior to that by all accounts he had been a first class reporter. Regarding the profession he served so well, he once remarked:

. . . the experience of an editor has to be acquired and it is an expensive experience.⁴³

More than thirty years after the event a member of the *World's* reporting staff in 1909 wrote of his impression of Smythe that year, and it is probably typical of all the years he spent with this newspaper:

He was buried deep in a pile of newspapers in his editorial office in The Toronto World, poring over a score of newspapers and magazines from all over the continent. Scissors and newspaper cuttings were his laboratory aids, and he was ever researching, and, as he often told us, "seeking the unvarnished truth."

Albert Ernest Stafford Smythe was so independent in his thinking and so retiring in disposition that the later generations forgot that in his prime he

⁴⁰Albert E.S. Smythe, "The Blavatsky Centenary" *CT* 12: 6 (August 1931), 164.

⁴¹Albert E.S. Smythe. Letter to Catherine Menzies, October 20, 1921. Vancouver TS archives.

⁴²Sarah Lakin. Taped interview with Doris and Ted Davy in Calgary, June 1993.

⁴³[Smythe] "Official Notes" *CT* 11: 9 (November 1930), 274.

was not only a profoundly learned editor but had also been one of the best reporters of his time.⁴⁴

Surprisingly his name appears on the title page of only three books: the two collections of poetry plus his conflation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. However, his miscellaneous writing was voluminous. The 600 plus “Crusts and Crumbs” columns — well over a million words—would have amounted to several volumes—and what an interesting and historically valuable collection that would be! The number of editorials he wrote for various papers is incalculable; this is to say nothing of the hundreds of his leaders and articles which appeared in *The Canadian Theosophist*. He continued to write poetry until the very end of his life, as the poem quoted at the beginning of this study testifies.

Brotherhood is the central ideal in the Theosophic philosophy, and for Smythe it was not just an abstraction, but a reality on all levels. The Dickens Fellowship was a means of reaching the most downtrodden of humanity at the physical level, and Smythe’s association with it in Toronto and Hamilton was an active one as was his wife Janie’s. He wrote:

I am conscious, as I ought to be of the need to distribute the Bread of Wisdom, but [Blavatsky] also speaks of the Bread that feeds the Shadow, and bids us “give light and comfort to the toiling pilgrim.” I have had a good deal to do with starving people and my wife and I . . . have been only too well aware of the sore needs of thousands, and until they have had bodily food it is ill work to get them to think of their souls.⁴⁵

Albert Smythe was assumed by some of being a “fiery Irishman” but what evidence is available would suggest he kept his temper well under control. While there are indications he enjoyed intellectual debates, it is likely he won respect in many quarters for his fairness rather than being argumentative. The fact that he headed up so many voluntary organizations, not only Theosophical but also such as the Press Club, Whitman and Dickens Fellowships among others, would suggest he was elected to those positions because he was considered by the members as one who could get results with the minimum of disruption.

Flora MacDonald Denison, the ardent Whitmanite, had known him for at least a dozen years when she wrote about him in her journal, *Sunset of Bon Echo* in the Summer of 1916:

A teacher who is poet, philosopher, and orator is pre-eminently in the advance guard of our social life and is an especially valuable citizen. That Mr. A.E.S. Smythe can be placed in this classification no one who knows the man will deny. Mr. Smythe does not force his learning nor the wisdom of his views in any arrogant or dogmatic way, but teaches those less developed than himself in the same spirit that he seeks wisdom from those more developed than himself.

⁴⁴R[onald] V. G[arrett], “A.E.S. Smythe—An Appreciation” *CT* 28: 9 (November 1947), 195.

⁴⁵Albert E.S. Smythe. Letter to Hildegard Henderson, July 30, 1937.

. . . his wit and humour are patent—for he is very free from race bigotry and he has all the cosmopolitan qualities that make for the world citizen.⁴⁶

How did he assess himself? In spite of his natural gifts, he was modest to the extreme. He even thought his qualities fell short of the true aspirant on the spiritual path. As he wrote on one occasion to Mrs. Hildegard Henderson at the H.P.B. Library regarding his conflation of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

It has been indeed, as you say, a deeply moving and a profoundly searching work. One cannot associate oneself with such a book as intimately as I did over a long period without going into the depths of one's own nature, and to tell the truth I found every evidence of a very worthless character. But there is also so much to cheer even the depraved and outcast that it was an inspiration throughout.

Also, still in a self-assessment mood:

As an editor of so many years standing I have had to weigh evidence on all the leading questions of the day in the last 25 years or more, and I know the difficulty and the ease with which any of us may make mistakes.

He keenly appreciated music and the arts. He loved books, as attested by his extensive personal library. What is amazing is the amount of information his remarkable memory retained from his reading.

Smythe was a total abstainer from alcohol, tobacco, tea, coffee and meat, but as far as is known there is nothing in his writings nor are there any anecdotes to indicate he proselytized his belief in the benefits of such abstention.

* * *

As this brief study indicates, Albert E.S. Smythe was a remarkable man in every way. He was not perfect, which he would have been first to stress, but the use he made of the body and personality he had taken on for this incarnation seems to have been more Theosophically successful than that of most individuals who attempt to follow the spiritual path. For his long and unique service to the cause of Theosophy, Canadian Theosophists can but be most grateful.

⁴⁶From Flora Macdonald Denison's "An Appreciation of A.E.S. Smythe" in *The Sunset of Bon Echo*, Summer 1916.