

ELIHU SMITH'S ALL-AMERICAN ANTHOLOGY

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ALTHOUGH he was a successful and humane physician, a friend to the famous of his time, and a writer of sorts, what little fame Elihu Hubbard Smith has today rests almost exclusively on his editorship of the first entirely American poetry anthology, *American Poems*.¹ Linked with both the Connecticut Wits and the early writers of fiction and drama, he numbered among his friends William Dunlap, who produced his opera, *Edwin and Angelina*, at the John Street Theatre in New York; novelist Charles Brockden Brown, for whose novel, *Alcuin*, he wrote a preface before guiding it through the press; essayist Joseph Dennie, to whom he gave unsolicited but welcome advice; and poets Richard Alsop, David Humphreys, and Timothy and Theodore Dwight. There is also a possibility that he counted Noah Webster as a friend. The attributes these men admired in him—his open-mindedness, his own experience as a writer, and his sympathetic appreciation of the work of others—made him well-qualified to edit the anthology and to persuade poets to submit their work. A restless pursuer of knowledge, he considered no human activity alien to his interests.

Having graduated from Yale in 1786, the fifteen-year-old Smith spent two additional years studying theology with the elder Timothy Dwight in Greenfield, Connecticut. By the age of seventeen, he had written a group of five sonnets, among the first in American literature, and he was soon to study medicine in his home community of Litchfield and in Philadelphia with Dr. Benjamin Rush. Both at Yale and again in medical school, Smith was influenced by deistic

¹ Elihu H. Smith, ed. *American Poems* (Litchfield, Conn., 1793). A copy of this book is in the Special Collections Department of the Rutgers University Library. For complete bibliographical information on all the poets and poems represented in the anthology, see William Bottorff's edition of Smith's *American Poems* (Gainesville, Fla., 1966).

thought, eventually adopting religious views similar to Thomas Paine's. Moreover, he was sufficiently courageous to express his belief that God created a universe in which man might perfect himself by his reliance on reason. Despite Connecticut's infamous anti-heresy law, he insisted publicly that reason and education must prevail, and that they could do so only through the dissemination of books and the establishment of the ideal of political justice.²

Concluding his studies, the new physician began his practice in Wethersfield, Connecticut, in 1791, and made his first contributions to the early satiric collections of the Hartford Wits.³ Two years later, besides living and working in Litchfield, he was entertaining and advising his close friend, Charles Brockden Brown, who was in Litchfield when Smith began work on the anthology and who may have assisted him slightly with the work. The Preface to the anthology is dated from Litchfield, June, 1793. Smith was then only twenty-one years of age.

Although *American Poems* may be the first anthology limited to works by Americans, it is also one of the earliest anthologies of any sort to appear in the nation. As early as 1745, Mather Byles had edited a fifty-five page pamphlet composed primarily of his own poems.⁴ This collection, however, was not representative of the poetry being written, nor was it intended basically as an anthology. Twenty-eight years later, James Rivington, a royalist printer in New York City, "sent out a circular to all reputed poets, requesting to be favored with copies of their productions."⁵ Unfortunately, the Revolutionary War interrupted and ultimately terminated the project. At the cessation of hostilities, however, Mathew Carey, the Philadelphia printer, turned from his initial plan for a volume of American poems to a more ambitious project, the *American Museum*, which Fred Lewis Pattee mistakenly identifies as the first American anthology. Carey's statement of purpose describes in large part the

² See Harry R. Warfel, *Charles Brockden Brown* (Gainesville, Fla., 1949), pp. 41-42.

³ The group of separate satiric works, some written individually and others collectively, originally appeared in the *American Mercury*, a weekly collection edited by Joel Barlow and Elisha Babcock, beginning on August 8, 1791. The works were first published as a collection entitled *The Echo* in 1807.

⁴ Mather Byles, *A Collection of Poems by Several Hands* (Boston, 1745).

⁵ Fred Lewis Pattee, "Anthologies of American Literature Before 1861," *Colophon*, 2nd Ser., No. 7 (1934), n.p.

approach to the available material which Smith would use later: "Having long observed, in various papers printed on this continent, a vast number of excellent and invaluable productions which reflected credit on their authors, as well as on this country . . . I conceived that a publication, designed to preserve the most valuable of the pieces above alluded to could not fail to be useful."⁶

Whether the *American Museum* is an anthology or a magazine, what is pertinent is that Carey did publish two other poetry collections by British and American authors⁷ before Smith asked Thomas Collier, a Litchfield printer best known as the publisher of the newspaper, *The Weekly Monitor and American Advertiser*, to undertake the publication of the first collection of American verse. Collier, a prudent businessman who had previously declined to publish Smith's addresses, agreed to do the anthology on a subscription basis only. Although the subscription list eventually ran to six printed pages, comprised largely of Connecticut residents and including many of Smith's friends, the young anthologist did encounter financial and editorial difficulties in bringing the work to completion. Nearing an already once-delayed publication date, Smith was forced at the last minute to write to his fellow doctor and litterateur, Mason Cogswell, "This week we shall have a number of our *American Poems* finished off, unless once more disappointed. You will see yours as soon as possible and Mr. Collier the printer will depend on you to collect the subscription money of those whose subscriptions were on the paper which you held."⁸ Indeed, when the anthology did appear soon after the letter to Cogswell, Smith's Preface apologized for the delay of the appearance of the work, "owing to some unfortunate circumstances." Smith also noted the bad health of one of the editors "and other circumstances, too complicated and painful to

⁶ See *ibid.* Carey published the *American Museum*, one of the most important of the early American literary publications, from January, 1787, until December, 1792. It contained 515 poems, some of which appeared for the first time in its pages. Nonetheless, not only was the *Museum* a magazine rather than a book, but it also reprinted prose, as well as some work by English authors. Furthermore, Pattee seems to have had no knowledge of Byles' work.

⁷ *Select Poems, Chiefly American* (Philadelphia, 1791) and *The Beauties of Poetry, British and American* (Philadelphia, 1791).

⁸ See Marcia E. Bailey, *A Lesser Hartford Wit: Dr. Elisha H. Smith*, University of Maine Studies, No. 11 (Orono, Me., 1928), p. 62.

mention."⁹ He concluded his apology with the hope that the second volume of *American Poems* would be more elegant.

The second volume never appeared, however, and Smith, frustrated, moved to New York in 1794, where he died four years later during a yellow fever epidemic. Intending to continue to publish numbers of the anthology as long as America produced poetry of sufficient quality, he wrote, "This is but the beginning of an Undertaking. . . . Should the volume, now published, meet with that success which the value of the Poems it contains seems to warrant, it is the intention of the Publishers to add another."¹⁰

Although Smith wrote Cogswell in August that he was at work on the second volume, William Dunlap later wrote (*ms* note in a copy of *American Poems* now owned by Yale University): "Want of encouragement prevented the Editor from pursuing his labors."¹¹ Through the rest of 1793 and into 1794, Smith was busy selecting poems and contacting his literary friends. As late as March, he wrote again to Cogswell, "Have you written to John Devoties concerning any more of his poems? The first of May is near at hand and though I suppose the subscription for *American Poems* is not near full, I would wish to be in some state of preparation if it be so."¹²

Smith's economic difficulties were further aggravated by the issuance in Philadelphia and New York of an anonymous collection from the press of James Carey, Mathew's son.¹³ Carey omits the weighty paraphrases of classical and Biblical passages, which Smith seems to have admired, and places greater emphasis on poetry of a romantic tendency as well as political poetry of a Jeffersonian rather than a Federalist leaning.

Despite the publications by Smith and the two Careys, however, there was only a small contemporary audience for poetry. Earl L. Bradsher writes that "poetry was not read so much in America from 1787 to 1823 . . . as literary historians are inclined to believe."¹⁴

⁹ Smith, p. v. Despite the reference to editors in Smith's Preface, no evidence exists as to the identity of the other men. See Bailey, p. 62, for the suggestion that Charles Brockden Brown, Theodore Dwight, and Mason Cogswell are the three logical possibilities.

¹⁰ Smith, p. v.

¹¹ See Bailey, p. 75.

¹² See *ibid.*

¹³ [James Carey, ed.] *The Columbian Muse* (Philadelphia and New York, 1794).

¹⁴ See Earl L. Bradsher, *Mathew Carey—Editor, Author, and Publisher* (New York, 1912), p. 82.

Poetry, to be sure, did not sell well. As late as the end of 1818, Mathew Carey told Freneau, the most important poet of his day, regarding the latest edition of his poems, a printing of only 1000 copies then nine years old: "The demand here has ceased."¹⁵ Robert E. Spiller goes so far as to suggest that the tendency of writers of the day to gather into literary groups like Smith's Friendly Club, comprised of many of the greater and lesser Connecticut Wits and others, was in large measure caused by a climate hostile to writers. They met for self-protection as well as social companionship.¹⁶

Finally, it remains to be said that Smith may well have given up on the second volume not only for financial reasons, but because his health may have been in jeopardy. A description of him notes that physically he was neither large nor robust, but that he pursued his goals relentlessly with little regard for either his health or the debt in which he often found himself as a result of his commitments.

Smith brought to his task as editor a strong loyalty to his friends, an educated taste in contemporary literature, a concern about the degree and quality of communication between authors and readers, a strong nationalism, and the open mind that marks the man of the Enlightenment. Doubtless, that commitment to his friends which resulted in giving over half the book to the works of the Wits is what in large measure makes the collection so useful to the student of early American poetry. It is indeed proper, moreover, that John Trumbull and Timothy Dwight be represented more extensively than the other Wits, Trumbull because he was obviously the leader of the group,¹⁷ and Dwight because he was Smith's esteemed friend and beloved tutor. Furthermore, Smith's emphasis on the Wits supports the contention that his taste was both educated and contemporary.

Despite Smith's taste and his preferences for the poems of his friends, he was nationalistic in literature as well as in politics. The scope of his anthology was essentially national rather than regional, because he accepted service to the nation as one of his major pur-

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁶ Robert E. Spiller, *et al.*, eds. *Literary History of the United States* (New York, 1953), p. 129.

¹⁷ See Smith, p. 83. Timothy Dwight names Trumbull as the leader of the group of Wits in his poem, "Letter to Colonel Humphries."

poses. He wrote, "It did not appear to be a matter altogether destitute of usefulness, to bring together, in one view, the several poetical productions of the different states."¹⁸ Part of Smith's nationalism was a fervent but hardly jingoistic patriotism. In addition to Francis Hopkinson's popular Revolutionary War poem, "Battle of the Kegs"; George Richards' "Elegiac Ode to the Memory of Gen. Greene"; and James Allen's stridently patriotic "Poem Written at Boston," *American Poems* included the anonymous "The Speech of Hesper," written originally as a Federalist tract to influence the Constitutional Convention.¹⁹ While it contained only one poem by prominent Democrat Philip Freneau, and that a non-controversial sea piece, "Written at Sea, In a Heavy Gale," conversely, it did reprint patriotic if apolitical poems by Joel Barlow, who the year before had written poetry attacking undemocratic man and claiming the superiority of human rights over property rights.

Smith could include Barlow because he was determined to be representative and because political matters were not his dominant concern. Interested primarily in man's humanitarian social responsibilities and the importance of knowledge as a basic asset in living the good life, he was truly an enlightened man. And his anthology reflected that quality in his nature. It contains, for example, one of the earliest anti-slavery poems in America (an anonymous work actually by Theodore Dwight and at one time attributed to Smith himself).²⁰ He was also concerned with the editor's obligation to his audience and his fulfillment of his highest purposes: "It is not personal reputation which I much desire, above all, I have no relish for the fame which is disproportioned to the act supposed to merit it. The great object of all our labors must be to enlighten our fellowmen, and render them more happy."²¹

Besides serving his audience, Smith hoped to assist his fellow writers. He saw poems of value "in danger of being unread or even

¹⁸ Smith, p. iv.

¹⁹ See Leon Howard, *The Connecticut Wits* (Chicago, 1943), p. 194.

²⁰ See Bailey, p. 71. She attempts to show that Smith, who contributed two anonymous poems to the anthology, is the author of the anti-slavery poem, primarily on the strength of his membership in the Manumission Society. She ignores the correct identification in Samuel Kettel, ed. *Specimens of American Poetry* (Boston, 1829), II, 67-68. See also Bottorff's edition of *American Poems*, p. 319.

²¹ Letter to Joseph Dennie, June 18, 1797, in Bailey, p. 130.

lost," poems "known only to a few of their particular acquaintance and unheard of by the generality of their countrymen." As a result of his work, then, he hoped that "a more certain estimation can be made of the comparative merit of [our] various writers." Moreover, he wanted his anthology to motivate poets by "holding out to them a Work where, united with the like performance of the most celebrated among their countrymen, their poems may be equally secure of preservation and notice."²²

American Poems, then, presented, in what variety they possessed, the eminent poets of Smith's day. Just as the emphasis on known poets did not preclude the inclusion of little-known writers, so the generally staid neo-classic verse existed side-by-side with such pre-romantic elements as the realistic dialect of the anonymous poem, "The Country School"; the view of Indian life in Dunlap's "Cololoo"; and Richard Alsop's numerous discoveries of the archaic. It is also to Smith's credit that he omitted no prevalent contemporary verse form in his collection: the elegy, the ballad, the sonnet, the poetic epistle, the ode, and the invocation all appear.

Finally, although the ultimate value of the anthology is largely historical rather than literary, the work does keep before us the appealing person of Elihu Smith, himself. Concerned for others, he gave over his bed to a homeless and hopelessly ill fellow-physician, and himself contracted a fatal case of yellow fever. His obituary in *The Spectator* of New York City commented somewhat hyperbolically: "In him science and humanity have lost one of the noblest ornaments which this age or this century has produced. His talents were eminently diversified, and there were few departments in which he had not made himself proficient."²³ His accomplishments do not seem that impressive to the demanding and detached modern reader; nonetheless, it was that proficiency in literature applied to the editing of *American Poems* which secured for him and his anthology the place in American literary history they occupy.

²² Smith, pp. iii-iv.

²³ See Warfel, p. 122.