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Editorial

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Editorial

Insofar as William Robertson Smith is a figure recognised by students of nineteenth century culture, he is known mostly for two things. First is his expulsion from the Professorship of Oriental Languages in the Free Church College at Aberdeen after several years of accusations of heresy instigated by an article on the Bible which he wrote for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and which argued that the Pentateuch was not the composition of a single author. This is regularly cited as the last great heresy trial in Scotland, symptomatic of the nation's refusal to acknowledge the outcomes of the modern biblical scholarship that was widely accepted on the Continent. The second is Edward Said's identification of Smith—in his study of *Orientalism* (1978), one of the most influential books of postcolonial criticism—as the source of the discipline which claimed to be able to understand the East from the more advanced and higher cultural perspective of the West: 'Smith, I think, was a crucial link in the intellectual chain connecting the White-Man-as-expert to the modern Orient'.¹ In the first perspective, Robertson Smith is the hero of modernity, fighting the entrenched ignorance of a backward people who cling to ancient superstition. In the second, he is the villain of a Western refusal to engage with colonised peoples, determined to prove the inferiority of all who are not part of his Western, Christian culture: Said finds in Robertson Smith's writings 'a coercive framework, by which a modern "coloured" man is chained irrevocably to the general truths formulated about his prototypical linguistic, anthropological, and doctrinal forebears by a white European scholar'. It is from this perspective, established by Robertson Smith's writings, that 'the work of the great twentieth-century Oriental experts in England and France derived'.²

To these two perspectives, however, more specialised knowledge could add two further views. First, that he developed an evolutionary account of the development of religion that attempted to do for humanity's spiritual development what Darwin and Huxley had done for its biological development, and that his account was as challenging as theirs in its radical overturning of the

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1985; 1978), 235.

² *Ibid.*, 237.

securities of a world of stable truths. Second, that his comparative study of the cultures recorded in the Old Testament with those of other cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, was the beginning of the modern discipline of social anthropology, which was to be profoundly shaped, through the work of his great follower, Sir J. G. Frazer (who dedicated his great work, *The Golden Bough*, to Smith), by key concepts, such as totem and taboo, which Robertson Smith had brought into regular use. If one were to trace his influence on European thought, then major figures such as Durkheim and Freud would be among those whose thinking was decisively changed by their encounter with his work.

Add to this that he was the editor of one the great editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the Ninth (1875–88), which was the first to attempt to incorporate the theory of evolution into all of its materials, and one is left with the sense of a man who was not only a polymath but was at the beginning of many things—whether good or bad—that continue to be important in the modern world.

Robertson Smith was born in Aberdeenshire, educated in Aberdeen, challenged in Aberdeen and buried in Aberdeenshire. It was therefore appropriate that in its first year of its operation, the Centre for Scottish Thought at the University of Aberdeen should organise a symposium on Robertson Smith's work, and it is that symposium, held on 6 December 2007, from which the articles in this volume of the journal derive. It was a privilege to have in our audience Professor William Johnstone, who had organised the William Robertson Smith congress in 1994, on the centenary of Smith's death, and which produced the major publication on Smith in recent times—*William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment* (Sheffield, 1995). It was also a special pleasure that Astrid Hess was able to be in our audience, who is the great-granddaughter of Robertson Smith's sister, a sister who found a husband in Germany while on a tour with Smith in 1876, and whose account of life in the Smith family home, *Children of the Manse*, was translated by Astrid Hess and Gordon Booth and published in 2004.

The Smith that appears in his sister's account is also the Smith that appears in James Bryce's brief biography: 'Because he knew so much, he was interested in everything, and threw himself with a joyous freshness and keenness into talk alike upon the most serious and the lightest topics. He was combative, apt to traverse a proposition when first advanced, even though he might come round to it afterwards; and a discussion with him taxed the defensive acumen of his companions. . . . Yet this tendency, while it made his society more stimulating,

did not make it less agreeable, because he never seemed to seek to overthrow an adversary, but only to get at the truth of the case, and his manner, though positive, had it about it nothing either acrid or conceited. One could imagine no keener intellectual pleasure than his company afforded, for there was, along with an exuberant wealth of thought and knowledge, an intensity and ardour which lit up every subject which it touched'.³ What is striking is of just how many subjects Robertson Smith had an 'exuberant wealth of knowledge', and how that exuberance led him far beyond the boundaries of the knowledge that would be expected of a Free Church minister. Despite the fact that he remained committed till the end of his life to the Free Church, and indeed never ceased to be a minister in it, a biography published shortly after his death noted that he was 'an ardent student of Arabic literature [who] devoted more time to it than to Hebrew',⁴ and the striking photograph of him taken in arab dress (which appears on our cover) is subtitled with the *nom de voyage* given him by his travelling companions—Abdullah Effendi.

We hope that this volume will bring into focus a few of those subjects of which Robertson Smith had such a wealth of knowledge, and continue the effort to come to terms with the international significance and the Scottish impact of one of the most brilliant of Scotland's nineteenth-century intellectuals.

³ Ibid., 323–4.

⁴ James Bryce, *Studies in Contemporary Biography* (London, 1903), 318.