

JAMES EDWARD SMITH (1759-1828)

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This is one in a series of articles about prominent British and Irish field-bryologists of the past. The author would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content.

A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists is also available on-line at <http://britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk/>

Botanical career

Smith wrote the text – including that for bryophytes - in Smith and Sowerby's 36 volumes of *English Botany* (1790-1814), but the account of bryophytes in the fifth volume of his *The English Flora* was written by William Jackson Hooker and published after Smith's death. He also wrote a three-volume *Flora Britannica* (1800-04), *The Introduction to Physiological and Systematic Botany* (1807), and many articles for Abraham Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (1819), including numerous biographies of eminent botanists.

Smith's herbarium is held by the Linnaean Society in London, with additional plants at Norwich Museum. His letters are at the Linnaean Society and Natural History Museum in London, with additional papers at the Department of Plant Sciences and Magdalene College in Oxford, the manuscript collections at the British Library, National Archives of Scotland in Edinburgh, and the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

Family background and biography

James Edward Smith was born at 37, Gentlemen's Way, Norwich on December 2nd 1759, the eldest child of seven born to James Smith (1727-1795), a wealthy Unitarian woollen merchant, and Frances (*née* Kinderley, 1731-1820), only daughter of the Reverend John Kinderley (1705-1775). John Kinderley was the son of Nathaniel Kinderley, who in turn was a son of Jeffrey (or Geoffrey) Kinderley (or Kinderlee) (1635-1714). Jeffrey Kinderley was a friend of Daniel Defoe.

James Smith (James Edward's father) was a son of William Smith (born c.1692-1702) and Elizabeth (*née* Westall, c.1702). Elizabeth was the daughter of Samuel Westall and Ann (*née* Palmer). Two sons (Richard (1765-1836) and William (1781-1850)) of Benjamin Westall (1736-1794) - himself the son of Benjamin (one of Elizabeth Westall's brothers) - became prominent artists and merit entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

Elizabeth Westall's other brother Samuel married Anne Reeve, whose nephew Robert Reeve (1739-1815, attorney and merchant of Lowestoft) married Pleasance Clarke (1739-1820), whose daughter Pleasance Reeve married James Edward Smith.

James Smith's younger brother Samuel (c.1728-1798) married Martha Adams (1730-1757), and their son William Smith, M.P. and a Unitarian (1756-1835) married Frances Coape (1758-1840) in 1781. Their daughter Frances ("Fanny", 1788/9-1880) married William Edward Nightingale (1794-1875); Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was their daughter, and hence a rather distant great-niece of James Edward Smith's.

In 1796, Smith married Pleasance Reeve (1773-1877), daughter of Robert Reeve (1739-1815), attorney and merchant of Lowestoft and Pleasance (*née* Clarke or Clerke, 1739-1820). Robert Reeve was probably a nephew of Anne Reeve (born c.1700) who married Samuel Westall (born c.1696), and Samuel was an elder brother of Elizabeth Westall who married William Smith, James Edward's paternal grandfather. Thus, Pleasance Reeve and James Edward Smith probably shared Anne Reeve and Samuel Westall as great-aunt and great-uncle.

James was first educated at home, where his mother endowed him with a love of flowers. However, he did not begin to study botanical science until 1777, when he was eighteen. His friends James Crowe (1750-1807, surgeon of Lakenham), Hugh Rose (c.1719-1792), John Pitchford (c.1737-1803), and the Reverend Henry Bryant (1721-1799) guided his early education. Crowe taught him his mosses.

Being a non-conformist, he was ineligible for Cambridge or Oxford University, so in 1781 he went to Edinburgh University in order to study medicine. There he studied botany under Dr John Hope, who taught the Linnaean system. Smith also established a natural history society in Edinburgh.

In September 1783, with a letter of introduction to Sir Joseph Banks (then president of the Royal Society), he went to London in order to study under Dr John Hunter and Dr William Pitcairn. Soon afterwards, Smith bought Linnaeus's library, manuscripts, letters and herbarium, which he housed in apartments in Paradise Row, Chelsea. Smith had gone south intending to continue in medicine, but fully indulged his botanical interests.

Having obtained his medical degree in London in 1786, Smith set off on The Grand Tour of the Continent, visiting many naturalists along his way, and examining their herbaria and libraries. He wrote up his adventures in a three-volume *Sketch* (1793).

On returning to London in 1787, he moved from Chelsea to a house in Great Marlborough Street, where he established the Linnaean Society at its first meeting in April 1788, with Smith himself as president, an office to which he was re-elected every year for the rest of his life.

Smith delivered lectures on botany and zoology at his house, where his pupils included members of the aristocracy. He also became lecturer in botany at Guy's Hospital, and

began to publish works of natural history. In 1791 he began arranging the Queen's herbarium and teaching natural history to her daughters.

James and Pleasance had no children, and they moved from London to Norwich soon after marrying in 1796.

Smith was knighted in 1814, but in 1818 was overlooked for the chair of botany at Cambridge (being a non-conformist), a post which he had hoped to fill. He died in Norwich on March 17th 1828, and was buried in the vault of the Reeve family at St. Margaret's Church in Lowestoft. Pleasance Smith survived her husband by 49 years, living to the age of 103.

Acknowledgement

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