

Foreword

ELSDON COLES SMITH: "He Hath an Excellent Good Name"

Elsdon (*Eng.*) One who came from Elsdon (Ellis's valley or hill), in Northumberland.

Cole, Coles (*Eng.*) Descendant of Cole, a pet form of Nicholas (people's victory).

Smith, Smithe (*Eng., Scot., Ir.*) The worker in metals.

(from *The Dictionary of American Family Names*)

Elsdon C. Smith is THE WORKER IN NAMES.

WE ALL KNOW THAT MR. SMITH has in almost every sense been the mainstay of the American Name Society. He is also a reticent, perhaps even retiring, man, and we who think we know him do not. To fill in some details, on November 11, 1975, I wrote to Mr. Smith and asked for information about himself so that I could include a goodly amount of biographical data in this short essay of appreciation. On November 15, in his characteristic quick reply to letters, he sent me a modest half-page, typed, double-spaced scarcity that gave only the barest information, actually not as much as I had already found in *Who's Who in America*.

The son of Dr. George W. and Eva (Coles) Smith, Elsdon was born on January 25, 1903, in Virginia, Illinois. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree (1925) from the University of Illinois; his LL. B. (1930) was earned from Harvard Law School. During 1933-35, he was a faculty member of the Chicago Law School. On December 23, 1933, he married Clare Irvette Hutchins. They had one daughter, Laurel Gleda, deceased. He is a member of the American, Illinois State, and Chicago Bar associations, and has been a member of several law firms in Chicago from 1930 to the present. He noted that he had published six books on "the subject of names," and signed the sheet, "DAS IS ALL."

Having known Mr. Smith and his wonderful wife Clare for almost 20 years, I can say that there is much more. He works diligently and successfully as an attorney, but his avocation has been the study of names, especially personal names. For more than 50 years, he has been active in onomastic research and in the promotion of such work. He was a founder of the American Name Society, its first president

(1951-54; again in 1970), its attorney since its founding, and Book Review Editor of *Names* (1953-present).

He has energetically supported the work of the Society and is personally responsible for obtaining many of its members. His leadership and administrative skills have helped make the American Name Society the first and leading organization in the Americas solely concerned with onomastics. Several regional conferences and institutes have now been initiated to advance the study of names. Mr. Smith has been the keynote speaker at several of these. He participated in the early phases of the work toward establishing a place-name survey of the United States and has continuously encouraged those involved in its planning. Under his direction and inspiration, the Society has become truly international, as a sampling of the articles published in *Names* will prove and as is manifest in its membership list. By his example, many young scholars have been persuaded to devote research time to onomastics, both in the United States and in other countries. His devotion to the furthering of onomatology has seemingly been tireless and selfless. In the American Name Society files, there are more than 1,000 pieces of correspondence from Mr. Smith. Multiply this by the numerous other correspondents he must have and then some concept of his dedication becomes more than merely apparent.

His major books have become standard informational references in the field of personal names. *The Dictionary of American Family Names* contains more than 30,000 surnames, with derivations and meanings. Since American surnames are so often difficult to interpret because of national and cultural mixes, as well as changes that occur for personal or bureaucratic reasons, this dictionary has importance beyond that of a mere compilation. It is certainly an attempt to work through the changes of names that occurred when immigrants moved into and across what is now the United States.

American Surnames (1969), a narrative text, is a sweeping discussion of surnames, probably the best available anywhere. In the "Foreword" appears the statement of frustration that must be endemic to all who try to interpret the origin of names: "Preparing a book on American surnames with all their forms and different national derivations is not quite so difficult as trying to eliminate the oceans by dipping the water out with one hand, a teaspoonful at a time, but both tasks seem to be endless. One cannot logically compare the length of two infinities." That says it all, but does not include persistence or the human propensity to find out what is on the other side of what is curious.

Mr. Smith's most important book for research is *Personal Names: A Bibliography* (1952), kept current through the annual bibliography that appears in *Names*. This annotated work is indispensable for anyone

who wishes to study personal names, for in it are listed the titles of books and articles on names in every conceivable category and nationality. Each item is described and evaluated. Furthermore, included in each item entry is the name of a library (or libraries) where the work can be found. This bibliography has understandably taken its place as the major contribution to the scholarship of personal names and their implications.

Although the essays that follow are in our own way an attempt to recognize the contributions of Mr. Smith to the onomastic discipline, they are not enough to reveal his generosity in time, energy, and intellect. Recently, I was privileged to look into a library's periodical collection. There, I saw 23 bound volumes of the magazine *Names*. It was a moment of reflection, perhaps a bit of awe, for me to see something that is definitely a reality that contains touchable substance. The mind and actions of Mr. Smith stand behind all this work. Since he is active in a vocation that undoubtedly is separate from the discipline of onomastics, he may not believe that his accomplishment noted here is his life's work, but indeed it can easily stand as such. He is a remarkable man, one with a name and a vision.

Kelsie B. Harder

The State University College at Potsdam, New York

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This list includes only the major works by Mr. Smith. All articles, and they are numerous, have been omitted, as well as the annual bibliographies on personal names that have appeared in *Names* since 1953. All books are still in print.

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