Goldwin Smith: Anti-Semite?

Tuesday, 03 March 2009

New book exposes famed professor's bias

In 1868, Andrew Dickson White assembled a distinguished faculty to teach at New York's new land-grant institution, Cornell University. None was more eminent than Goldwin Smith, the Regius Professor of History at Oxford University, who left his prestigious chair in his prime, at age forty-five, to teach European and English history in Ithaca. Smith lent credence to White's intention to create a truly great university in Upstate New York.

Though he returned several times to give lectures, Smith left Cornell in 1872 for the University of Toronto, where he became an important figure in the intellectual life of Canada. He is remembered by all Cornellians, of course, for the magnificent building on the Arts Quad that bears his name. In the lobby, a plaque proclaims him "everywhere a champion of liberty and progress." Smith bequeathed a stone bench to the University as well; set in front of the building, it is inscribed, per his instructions, "Above all nations is humanity."

What, then, are we to make of claims (not addressed by either of Cornell's fabled chroniclers, Carl Becker and Morris Bishop, 1913, PhD '26) in a new book by McMaster University religious studies professor Alan Mendelson that Smith was "perhaps the most vicious anti-Semite in the English-speaking world"?

In Exiles from Nowhere: The Jews and the Canadian Elite, Mendelson reports that Smith was obsessed with the Jewish lineage of British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, whom he despised. Even more disturbing are essays by Smith, written with a tone of academic objectivity, that appeared in English literary journals over the last third of the nineteenth century, about Russian pogroms and "The Jewish Question." Smith acknowledged that the term "anti-Semitic" was applicable to him even though he was "absolutely free" of "the slightest shadow of religious antipathy." Jews have faced persecution throughout history, he maintained, but they are responsible for the "repulsion" they engender in others. Before the advent of Christianity, all religions were tribal, but, Smith asserted, modern Jews cling to the "dead integument of an earlier and lower stage of existence." The "spirit of Judaism," their "peculiar character and habits," and especially their "preoccupation with money-making" mark them as different—and less worthy—than others. Jews absorb "the wealth of the community without adding to it." They are best described as "parasites"—a term, Smith insisted, "merely used for the purpose of classification." Oppressors as well as oppressed, they are "cruel usurers, eating the people as it were bread."

Jews are victimized as well, Smith suggested, for their social exclusiveness, their arrogance and haughtiness. They see themselves as God's favorite race, superior to Gentiles. Circumcision, a "barbarous rite," marks the "tribal isolation" of Jews. They have brought on themselves the violence visited on them by hardworking, though ignorant, Russian peasants: "My contention is that the blame rests mainly, not on Christian bigotry, but on the situation created by the wandering and separatist habits of the Jews. I do not see why Christendom should be slandered or slander itself."

Smith suggested two possible solutions to the "Jewish problem": assimilation or repatriation to Palestine. He was not optimistic, however, that Jews would give up their parasitic life and return to the land. His essays were labeled anti-Semitic by contemporaries, including learned rabbis, who sharply criticized his stereotypes of Jews. In 1881, a cartoonist depicted "Injewdicious Goldwin" holding under his arm a journal with the headline "Violent attack on the Jews by G. Smith" on its cover.

Though he was certainly not "the most vicious anti-Semite in the English-speaking world," Smith was far worse than the "gentee" Jew-haters in turn-of-the-century America and Canada. Especially objectionable to Cornellians—who are justifiably proud of the Founders' radical, convention-flouting rejection of racial and gender bias and their openness to students and faculty of any or no religious denomination—was his hypocritical denial of "liberty and progress" to that large swath of humanity that he loathed.
Glenn Altschuler, PhD ’76, is the Litwin Professor of American Studies and dean of the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions. Isaac Kramnick is the Schwartz Professor of Government. They are preparing a history of Cornell from 1945 to the present.

Exiles from Nowhere is available from Robin Brass Studio Inc.: www.rbstudiobooks.com