

**Joel Sumner Smith, 1830-1903**  
**American Pioneer of Slavic Librarianship**

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I became well acquainted with the Joel Sumner Smith Papers (Manuscript Group Number 461), Manuscript and Archives, during my tenure at Yale as the Curator of the Slavic and East European Collections. When asked to prepare various exhibitions relating to my specialty I would always look at this collection hoping to find materials worthy to exhibit. The papers consist of two boxes dated 1848-1911. Of particular interest for me were files 9-10, Box 1, which contain the Russian Correspondence and files 11-14 containing bills of Smith's purchases as well as Accession files, from Box 2. While examining these files I found a wealth of information, which piqued my interest to look at the papers in more detail. Last summer I was granted a paid leave of absence, approved by the Yale Library administration, to do just that.

The librarian Joel Sumner Smith, (1830-1903), (Yale, 1853), in 1896 donated his private Slavic collection to the Yale University Library and thus founded one of the premier Slavic collections in North America. Smith was one of the first American librarians to begin seriously collecting books and materials in Slavic languages. The Yale University Library in 1875 appointed him as the Linonia and Brothers Collection Librarian. In 1895 he was promoted to the position of assistant librarian at which post he stayed until his death in 1903. Collaborating with European book-dealers, he purchased materials related to Slavic and East European studies for many years. The collection, although strongest in Russian publications, included many titles in other Slavic and East European languages such as Polish, Croatian, Serbian, Czech, Slovak, Estonian, Latvian, Kashubian etc. The Smith collection is based mainly on what we would today call Slavic philology: namely folk literature, bibliographies, grammars and dictionaries. The subjects of history and literature as well as major journals, proceedings of learned societies, reference tools and the writings of prominent authors, novelists, poets and critics are also well represented in the collection. (See Appendix)

In 1896 Joel Sumner Smith published a catalog of his collection under the title *Catalogue of Books*. On the title page the imprint simply states "Privately printed, 1896." The same year this Catalogue accompanied the transfer of his Collection to the Yale University Library. The Catalogue was published anonymously. The collection, unrivalled in its importance for Slavic studies in North America, was donated with no mention of Smith's name. Legend has it that Joel Sumner Smith stipulated that the Yale Library Committee, which had to be informed about his gift, could not mention the donor or his generous gift "while he was still above ground."

A "Transliteration Table" follows the title page of the *Catalogue of Books*. Joel Sumner Smith was one of the first American librarians who established a system of Romanization for the Cyrillic alphabet. Contrary to what the ALA has suggested, his system is the closest to the pronunciation of Slavic phonemes and because of its simplicity was later incorporated into contemporary LC transliteration tables.

The catalog of 908 numbered entries printed on 106 leaves represents a collection of over 6,000 volumes appraised in 1896 at 12,000 U.S. dollars. The entries are arranged in alphabetical order with a Romanized key word of the entry in parentheses and with a remarkable system of references printed in bold letters. The "Addendum," pp. 97-100, is followed by a four-page subject index entitled "Subject Clews." The index covers topics from Alaska to White Russian literature and refers the reader to the numbered entries in the Catalogue. The Catalogue ends with "Corrigenda," introduced with a statement, "This list is made necessary by the premature printing of the catalogue through a misunderstanding."

Joel Sumner Smith's Archive contains copious correspondence relating to the publishing of his *Catalogue of Books*. Breitkopf & Hartel, a company based in Leipzig, published the Catalog in 1896. This firm was recommended to Joel Sumner Smith by a Berlin book seller, Paul Scheller's Buchhandlung. Smith habitually acquired materials from Paul Scheller, a longstanding partner, particularly Czech, Polish, Croatian, Serbian and Kashubian books and serials. In a letter dated August 14, 1895 G. Kustenmacher, an employee of the company, suggested Breitkopf & Hartel as a publisher for Smith's Catalogue. He was convinced that Breitkopf & Hartel were best suited for the job because they were the publishers of the *Archiv für Slavische Philologie*. "They will apply the same format as is used for the "Archiv", they will print one hundred copies of the Catalogue and each page will be printed on one leaf"—wrote Kustenmacher. Kustenmacher even enclosed paper samples along with an estimate of the cost for publication of the Catalogue. From a letter of September 19, 1895 it is already clear that everything is arranged and that both firms are only waiting for the manuscript to be sent to them in Germany. The letter of June 11, 1896 confirmed to Joel Sumner Smith that the long-awaited manuscript had safely arrived and that it had been immediately forwarded to

Breitkopf & Hartel in Leipzig. All arrangements were done through the services of Paul Scheller's Buchhandlung. Even the payments to the Leipzig publisher were delivered through the Berlin firm. The cost for the catalog was 512.80 Marks. I found eight letters from Kustenmacher regarding the publication of the Catalog, the first one dated August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1895 and the last one from June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1897. Collaboration between Paul Scheller's Buchhandlung and Joel Sumner Smith ended in 1902 when Smith asked Kustenmacher to stop all subscriptions he had had with the firm. Kustenmacher answered with a cordial letter dated August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1902, in which he wished Smith "good health." He signed off as "your devoted G. Kustenmacher from the Paul Scheller's Buchhandlung." Joel Sumner Smith died on February 13, 1903 at the age of 73.

In connection with the publication of the *Catalog of Books* I found in the Archive five letters written by a Herr L. Volkmann, a Breitkopf & Hartel employee, who corresponded with Joel Sumner Smith throughout this publishing venture. These letters illustrate typical exchanges between the author and the publisher, particularly when the author was very meticulous in his demands and at the same time the publisher expected a clean manuscript without last minute corrections and changes. At the end all was well. On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1897 nine paper bound copies were sent to New Haven by mail. Eighty-seven paper-bound copies along with two hardbound copies (the latter now held in the Manuscripts and Archives Department at Sterling Memorial Library) were put in a trunk and shipped by sea to Tice & Lynch in New York City. Tice & Lynch were the American shippers who dealt with customs, made deliveries to New Haven and provided other services for the Yale University Library. One of the two remaining paper bound copies was sent to Kustenmacher, who in turn sent Smith a warm letter of thanks. The other paper bound copy was retained for the Breitkopf & Hartel archives. The last letter from Volkmann was very polite. The firm offered its services for any possible future manuscripts by Smith. Volkmann also expressed his hope that Smith would recommend the services of his company to other writers in America. Unfortunately, not a single copy of Smith's letters in regard to the publication of the *Catalogue of Books* was found in his Archive.

I was interested in finding out what inspired Joel Sumner Smith, an accomplished music performer, teacher and librarian, to start a Slavic collection, which became his passionate hobby. Judging by his surname, his birthplace of Paxton, Massachusetts, and all other relevant information I have found out about him, he most certainly was not of Slavic origin. In the America of his time it was quite unusual for an Anglo-Saxon American to be interested in the study of the Russian language. In reading the letters he wrote home, while he was a student at Yale (1849-1853), or in any of his student papers, I did not find a single mention of any Slavic topic. According to his obituary Mr. Smith started to learn Russian in the late 1870s when he was over forty years old. Some scholars believe William Dwight Whitney, a Yale professor "intensely interested in the Slavic tongues," influenced Joel Sumner Smith to

commence his studies of the Russian language. But this is just a conjecture and I did not find any evidence to support this supposition. He must have been an excellent student, though, because in 1886 he had already published a translation in English of Nikolai Alekseevich Nekrasov's poem *Moroz-krasnyi nos*. *The Red-nosed Frost* was published by Ticknor and Company of Boston. The title page reads as "*Moroz krasnyi nos = Red-nosed Frost sostavil Nikolai Aleksieevich Nekrasov, translated in the original meter from the Russian of N. A. Nekrasov.*" Again, Smith chose to remain anonymous! The printing on the title page was done in two colors, red and black. These colors are intertwined and the 120 page handsome book of parallel texts in Russian and English is nicely bound.

A second edition followed in 1887, published by the same company, with the same title page title and again without the name of the translator. An additional note is introduced-- "Second edition emended with three illustrations designed and engraved by W. J. Liton, and with an appendix." The appendix consists of a literal line-for-line prose translation of *Moroz Krasnyi Nos* and of additional notes that contain "A few words concerning the meter" which explain that "amphibrachic lines are 1-506 and 788-1012 and that the dactylic lines are 507-787." Later we will see some criticism of Smith's style of versification.

*Red-nosed Frost* did not go unnoticed. I found clippings of book reviews meticulously collected by Joel Sumner Smith in Box 1, folder 5 of the Archive. The work received mixed reviews. Here are some examples of the reactions to the book:

In the "Evening Transcript" of May 19, 1886 in the section "New Books" A.W.K. gave a detailed account of the content of the poem along with his comments on the social and religious aspects of the work. The reviewer was clearly shaken by the story of Prokl and Daria, the main protagonists of the poem, and was particularly saddened by the fate of Russian women as portrayed by Nekrasov.

"The Critic" of New York, June 5, 1886 among other comments said: "The translation is anonymous, but evidently has been made by a thorough scholar, who has sacrificed the smoothness of his lines occasionally to the desire for a literal rendering. The Russian text and a fine portrait of Nekrasov are given, and the book will doubtless be of interest not only to the special students of Russian literature, now rapidly increasing in numbers, but to the general reader as well."

"The New York Daily Tribune" of May 24, 1886 commented rather severely: "The poem says much for the force and realism of the original that even in the disguise of the remarkable version now published the poem is often impressive and almost always interesting. We have become indebted for the translation perhaps to someone who is not at home in the English

language, certainly to some one who is not used to the composition of English verse. It is evident that the translator has no ear for our meters, since very few stanzas can be scanned without extreme violence to the accent and to many of them it must be said that they are not verses at all ... The Russian text is printed on alternate pages with the translation and the volume (which come from the University Press) in one of the prettiest and best finished pieces of book-making we have seen for many a day."

"The Evening Post," New York, April 8, 1887 "In connection with a proposed second edition of 'Red-Nosed Frost' from the Russian of Nekrasov (Boston, Ticknor and Co. 1886) it may be of interest to state that the translator is Mr. J. Sumner Smith, librarian of the Linonian and Brothers' Library, Yale University. Mr. Smith possesses a fine private collection of Russian literature and is one of the most zealous students of this language in this country."

"The New York Times," New York, June 7, 1886 "We do not think we are doing an injustice to this volume of Russian verse when we are of the opinion that an absolutely literal translation without any attempt at rhyme would have given a better opportunity of judging its merits. If there be any inherent charm in the original poem it is lost in part in the English versification."

"The Nation," September 30, 1886. The reviewer dwells on the story and on the greatness of Russian literature. In regard to the translation he wrote the following: "The translation read as a whole, in spite of great excellences, leaves a very different impression from the original, and what avails verbal literalness or exactness of meter if the real truth — the impression on the feelings — which the words and the meter of the original tried to sharpen and define, is not only blunted, but changed to something other? ... And this identifiable spirit of the Russian landscape and folk seems to us to have evaporated from this daintily printed translation of Nekrasoff. Nevertheless, there is so much that is good that we would urge the anonymous translator to try his hand at Nikitin or Tolstoy, or some of the contemporary poets,"-- This review was written by Eugene Schuyler, a Yale graduate (Yale, 1858; Yale Ph. D. 1861).

Later on, very likely not being aware of the identity of the Nation's reviewer, Smith sent a copy of the *Red-nosed Frost* to Schuyler, his Yale colleague, who was the first translator into English of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (New York, Leypoldt & Holt, 1867) and an established diplomat. In a letter of January 4, 1888 from Alassio, Ligurnia in Italy, Schuyler wrote to Smith " ...I already have your 'Red-nosed Frost,' though I only now learnt that you were the translator. I shall therefore paste your letter in the copy I have, and consider it a presentation copy. I may add that I wrote a notice of the book in the Nation. But at this distance I don't remember what I said. I hope nothing disagreeable. Believe me, dear Sir, yours most sincerely, Eugene Schuyler." Smith was obviously not offended with Schuyler's lukewarm review since he sent the latter the second edition of the *Red-nosed Frost*. In a letter of March

25, 1888 Schuyler penned, "Dear Mr. Smith, Excuse my tardy acknowledgment of your kindness in sending me the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of your Red-nosed Frost, which I find greatly improved. Cannot you try something else now? I am overwhelmed with work, and my broken hand is far from strong, which must excuse my brevity. With many thanks, yours very sincerely, Eugene Schuyler."

In the files I found a more copious correspondence of nine letters with W.R.S. Ralston (1828-1889), the well-known promoter and translator of Russian literature in Great Britain. The Ralston letters are dated from September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1886 to December 19<sup>th</sup> 1887. Unfortunately, only one side of this correspondence is preserved—the letters by Smith are lost. According to M. P. Alekseev, who wrote the book *Vil'iam Rol'ston—propagandist russkoi literatury i fol'klora*, (Sankt-Peterburg, Nauka, 1994), Ralston burned his papers in a bout of depression towards the end of his life in 1889. Smith's translation of Nekrasov's *Moroz krasnyi nos* was the topic of their exchange of letters. It is understandable that Smith wanted to discuss his work with the foremost English-speaking expert in the field. He needed assurances that he could not find in America. To Ralston's great surprise Smith even sent a money draft in a second letter to him. "With the respect to the enclosed (in your letter) draft I will say nothing more just now then that I am frequently asked to give information of Russian subjects, but "thanks" are generally looked upon as a sufficient return." Ralston was impressed with Smith's work. "I have not yet read through your printed translation, but it seems to me, from the passages I have glanced at here and there, to be one of the best English rhymed versions of a Russian poem yet made." In a letter of October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1886 complimentary comments abound. "I have rigorously examined the verses and sought diligently for inaccuracies. But I have found so little to alter, that I feel as if I had not been worth my salt, and that I ought to apologize to you for not detecting more errors in your work ... I am very curious to know how you managed to obtain so accurate an acquaintance with Russia, and to translate so accurately a poem, which offers many difficulties, idiomatic etc. I am thinking of sending to the Academy of Sciences of St. Petersburg (of which I am Corresponding Member) a short notice of study of Russian in America, and I should be pleased to have any details about yourself, how, when and where you studied, etc., etc." (so would I! T.L.) ... "Now in regard to your metrical version. It is a remarkable tour de force. I am lost in admiration of the ingenuity with which you have contrived to keep faithful to the sense, the meters, and the rhyme system of the original. I should not have thought such a feat possible. But for at least 20 years I have been constantly, in print and talk, declaring that foreign poetry should be -- as a general rule -- turned by at least English writing translators into prose not verse. And I cannot alter my opinion, in spite of the very remarkable merits of your metrical version. So I have not ventured to make any comments on it except in one or two instances, where the sense was concerned. If you adhere to your intention of bringing out a second edition, and if you still

think an introduction by me will be of service, I shall be happy to supply you with a few pages of remarks about Russian poetry in general and Nekrasov's in particular."

In a ten-page enclosure to the letter entitled "In re Nekrasov's Frost" Ralston commented: "First as to the Russian text. My copy is in vol. 1 of *Stikhotvoreniia N. Nekrasova*, St. P. 1869." Ralston pointed out the textual differences of different editions. He then provided a line-by-line analysis of Smith's translation and suggested changing certain words. For instance Ralston noted that in line 16 of the poem "'rydaet' means 'sobs' rather than 'cries' or 'weeps'"; in line 23 "'syna raba' is rather 'a son who is a slave' than 'a slave's son'"; in line 500 "'nogi' 'feet' is at all events more poetic, and probably more correct than 'legs' here"; in line 671 "'rodimago' I should prefer 'own' to 'dear.'" There are two pages of Smith's text where Ralston put a check mark next to the lines he agreed with, "Yes" when he liked the verses very much and sometimes a comment where he offered a more appropriate word for the text.

As mentioned above, I was not able to find any information about Smith's endeavors to learn Russian. In a letter dated June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1887, Ralston wrote "Many thanks for the information you gave me in your letter of November 12 about yourself and your Russian studies. It interested me much." (Yes, this would be also very interesting to American Slavic specialists today! T. L.) Ralston's last letter to Smith is dated December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1887. "My dear Sir, The volumes of your "Frost" and your letter have just arrived and the work in its new form looks, and I hope will prove very attractive. I will forward the two copies to Prof. Riola [1] and Mr. W.R. Morfill [2], and those which remain I will place where they will be appreciated. You undoubtedly deserve very great credit for the thorough conscientiousness with which you have worked. May you find many other worthy opportunities for bestowing the same—with best Xmas and New Year wishes, yours very truly W.R.S. Ralston."

In this presentation I have touched on those aspects of Joel Sumner Smith's achievements, which I thought would be the most interesting for this audience. I am running out of time and I have to stop now, but I still want to say that, hopefully, I will be able to write more papers about Smith. One paper might cover his treatise on the transliteration of the Cyrillic alphabet published in the Yale Review and the New Englander in 1891, in which he advanced his notions of simple phonetic transliteration in opposition to the formidable librarian Charles A. Cutter and his famous *Rules for Dictionary Catalog*. A later edition, *Transliteration from the Russian (Reprinted from the New Englander and Yale Review of May 1891)* was published in New Haven by The Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor Press in 1902.

Another paper could outline the Slavic book-trade world of Smith's time. I came across an abundance of invoices and letters from N. Kymmell, owner of the Buch und

Antiquariatshandlung in Riga, from whom Smith purchased the great majority of Russian, Polish and Baltic books. There are also other book dealers of interest, such as Edward Schuberth of New York, the aforementioned Paul Scheller of Berlin, Karl Hiersemann of Leipzig, the Polish firm Joseph Jolowitz from Poznan and many others. I also found a rich trove of correspondence with Russian book dealers from Moscow and St. Petersburg. For example, Mr. Rottger, located at No. 5, Nevsky Prospect, Vasilii Ivanovich Klochkov, Knigoprodavets-antikvarii, S. Peterburg, Liteinyi Prospekt 55, P. Shibanov, Antikvarnaia knizhnaia trgovlia, Moskva, Staraiia ploshchad na Il'inkie, and many others. Book-dealers from Vienna sent publications from the Slavic peoples within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Cammermeyers Boghandel from Christiania (nowadays Oslo) sent "Slaviske" and "Finske" folksongs and melodies. These letters and invoices fascinated me. They show a meticulous librarian at work, tirelessly claiming missing volumes, returning damaged books and above all Smith's in-depth knowledge of what to order for his collection in the emerging field of Slavic studies.

I could write another intriguing paper to show how Yale University already at this time nurtured its contacts with American diplomats, traveling alumni and other Americans abroad. The correspondence, for instance, between Smith and Schuyler, a former American Consul to Russia, reveals these developments. Schuyler regularly advised Smith, even from his new position at the American Consulate in Rome, about which Russian grammars he should order. At the same time, Schuyler pointed out to Smith whom to contact in St. Petersburg in order to supply these grammars. The correspondence of Mr. Van Name, Yale University Librarian from 1865 to 1905, is even more revealing about this international network with alumni who later became career diplomats, receiving communications and book shipments from all over the world.

I would like to conclude my paper with a quotation from *The Class of 'Fifty-Three in Yale College: a supplementary history concluding the fifth decade* (New Haven, The Dorman Lithographing Company, 1903) which reads: "No member of the Class, and at the close of his life, no then living graduate of Yale, had done, proportionately to his means, so much for the University as Smith."<sup>[3]</sup> In 1930, when the Sterling Memorial Library was built, there was a simple statement carved in stone in the exhibit corridor "Joel Sumner Smith, 1875-1903." Very few Yale librarians received such honor.

Thank you for your attention!

## **Notes**

1. Henry Riola, teacher of Russian language at the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. The author of *How to Learn Russian: A Manual for Students of Russian Based upon the Ollendorffian System of Teaching Languages, and Adapted for Self Instruction by Henry Riola, with a Preface by W.R.S. Ralston*. London: Trèubner & Co., 1878.

2. William Richard Morfill, 1834-1909. I found two letters from W.R. Morfill in the Joel Sumner Smith Archive:

One dated January 18, 1888. "4 Clarendon Villas, Oxford, Jan. 18, 1888. Dear Sir, Pray accept my best thanks for the interesting translation you have sent me of 'Moroz, krasnyi nos.' I have long been familiar with the poem and can therefore appreciate your effort to make it known to the American and English reader. You have had a difficult task and have achieved it very successfully.... There is painful truth in what a Russian minor poet Grigor'ev has said.

'O vier'te mnie – ne vesela  
Kartina – russkaia sem'ia..  
Sem'ia dlia nas vseгда byla  
Likhaia machikha, ne mat''

I hope you will go on and give the public some more specimens of the Russian muse. Some of the lines of Kol'tsov are exquisite - but perhaps hardly translatable. Our good friend Mr. Ralston, who has himself done so much to make Russian literature known, kindly gave me your address. I hope some time when you have a little leisure I may have the pleasure of hearing from you and again thanking you so much for your interesting and elegant little book. I remain dear Sir yours very truly W.R. Morfill."

The second letter is dated Mach 1, 1888 "My dear Sir, Many thanks for your letter and the book you kindly sent, which I looked through with interest. ... I hope when I have written something on Slavonic matters, which quite interest you that you will do me the pleasure of accepting a copy and again thanking you, I remain yours very truly W.R. Morfill"

3. Smith's almost fanatic devotion to the library and the Slavic collection as well as the financial consequences for his wife prompted the Yale Librarian, Mr. Van Name, to establish the J. Sumner Smith Fund to commemorate him by a lasting memorial. Van Name noted in the obituary for Sumner Smith the following: "While Mr. Smith was carrying out with such self-sacrifice his generous plans, he had reason to think that his wife's modest property would afford her a comfortable support, if she should survive him. As we now learn, recent losses have made serious inroads in this, and it is but just to his memory and to her that the first use of the fund should be to relieve her anxieties for the future."

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