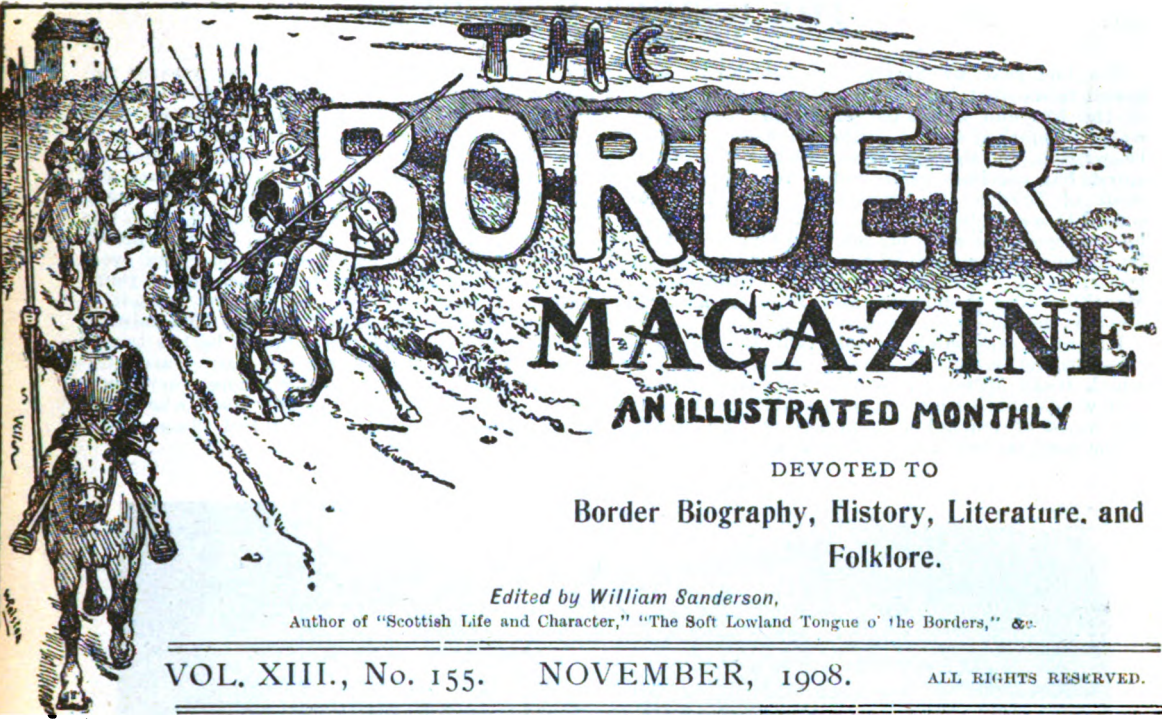


MR ALEXANDER SMITH, PEBBLES.



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## MR ALEX. SMYTH,

A VETERAN BORDER JOURNALIST.

**N**OWADAYS no one doubts the power and importance of the public Press, and the journalist is gradually coming into his own. Even the smallest weekly published in some obscure country village has a far-reaching influence, especially when local matters receive the first and most important position in its pages. The heart of the native, who has removed to some great centre of industry, or the emigrant who has crossed the ocean to distant lands, is refreshed and kept youthful by the weekly budget of home news which he so eagerly scans. Through the medium of his columns the editor of a local newspaper wields a very powerful influence, and hence we honour the men who year in year out wield the pen, often in silence and semi-obscurity, and by their careful preparation of their weekly message do much to elevate their fellow-men and keep alive the ties of home and kindred. Especially do we honour such men when they have grown grey in the service of the public and yet retain much of the buoyancy of youth.

One of the oldest editors in Scotland is Mr Alexander Smyth, of the "Peeblesshire Advertiser," and as he is a personal friend of ours

we could say much in appreciation of his many good qualities, his wonderful memory for details, his musical abilities, and his kindly disposition, but we prefer to let others speak of him to our readers.

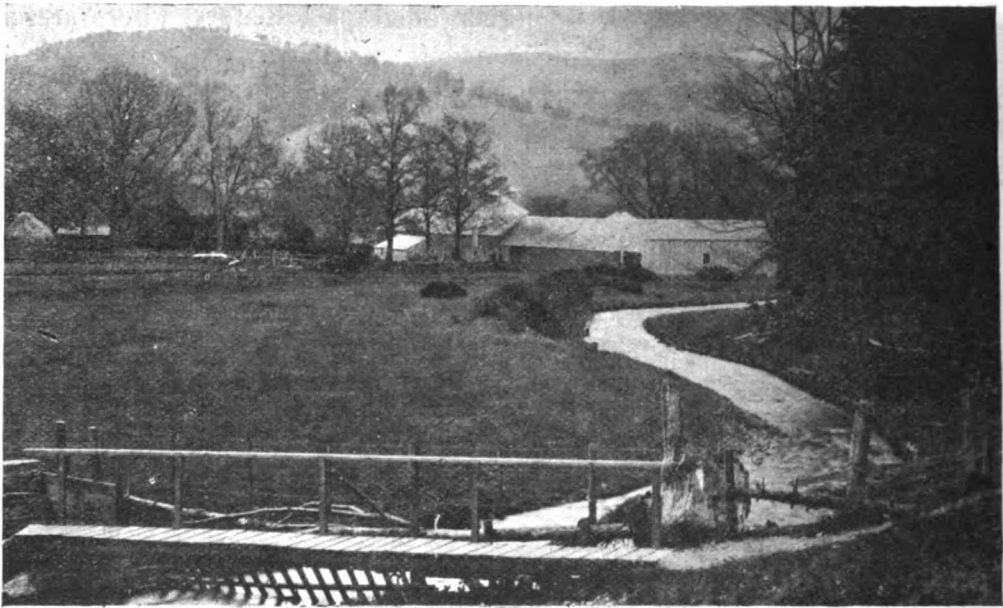
Mr John Lanyon, of the Central News, London, is contributing a series of articles on "Newspaper Men" to the "Phonographic Monthly," a magazine published in shorthand, and the subjoined, which forms No. 6 of these articles and appears in the June number of the "Monthly," we take the liberty of reproducing. The article by Mr Lanyon is as follows:—

Number six of our "Notable Newspapermen" is a veteran journalist. On the 18th March last he entered upon his eightieth year; and he is still in harness! When, some short time ago, he wrote to me at the Central News office stating that he wished to relinquish his position as the Peebles correspondent of the News Agency with which I am connected, I recalled the fact that I had no knowledge of the time when Mr Smyth was not one of the Central News's most trusted provincial representatives. Instantly it struck me that one who had so long been a newspaperman was eminently fitted to be a guide, philosopher, and friend to the aspiring readers of the "Phonographic Monthly," from whose ranks will undoubtedly emerge the notable newspapermen of the future.

The fact that Mr Smyth is a Scotchman suggested to me that in the introduction to a sketch of the life and character of Hugh Miller, the writer remarked that an interesting essay might be written on the elements which the Scottish spirit has specially contributed to the common stock of British characteristics. And he proceeded to assert that no one could doubt, whether he surveyed the field of art or literature, that Scotchmen do bring into the field quite distinct traits. All readers of the "Phonographic Monthly" love Scotchmen, and they will heartily endorse the foregoing statement.

I think it may safely be said that Mr Smyth is possessed of many of those characteristics for which Hugh Miller was so markedly conspicuous, and which carried him to such a high position in the world of journalism and letters. Mr Smyth is the most modest of men, and he would never be

working life as a handloom weaver, weaving being then the staple industry of the district, but, like other youths who have risen, he was very fond of reading, and a gentleman in his native village, who was always anxious to do what he could to cultivate and develop any literary taste that was observable in the youthful members of the community with which he was associated, and who was the possessor of a splendid library, kindly placed his valuable collection of books in every department of literature at the disposal of young Smyth. Needless to say, he availed himself of this privilege to the fullest extent. The valuable information which he thus derived he has turned to practical account in all his after years. Unfortunately, it was not by any means every youth evincing a taste for reading and study who found a patron such as young Smyth had the good fortune to come across.



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found making any claim to being a celebrity in journalism. But, then, he cannot help himself. A man who has attained to such an age as he has, who has been for fifty years hard at work on the newspaper Press, and who is still wielding the journalistic pen, is a celebrity, and the "Phonographic Monthly" is proud to present his likeness and a few facts of his career to its many thousands of readers throughout the British Empire.

Mr Alexander Smyth was born at Kingskettle, a small village in Fifeshire, on the 18th of March, 1829. He received what was in those days considered a more than ordinarily good education at the village school, and he has a very grateful remembrance both of the teachers and the manner and matter of their instruction. He began his

Mr Smyth's first journalistic work consisted in acting as local correspondent for several newspapers published in the "Kingdom" of Fife; but in the autumn of 1860 he was appointed reporter and proof-reader on the "Kinross-shire Advertiser," under Mr George Barnet, proprietor and publisher of that paper. Then at the end of April in the following year he was appointed by the late Mr Alexander Westwood, Cupar-Fife, reporter in the Fife branch of the "Dundee Advertiser," which, on the 1st of May in that year came out as a daily. He acted in the same capacity for the "People's Journal," which was published weekly from the same office. For a short time in 1866 he was on the staff of the "Fife Herald," and in September, 1867, he accepted an appointment on the "Leith Burghs Pilot." Subsequently he con-

ducted the "Leith Observer," a paper which was started for a political object, and having successfully served its purpose by the return of the candidate whose cause it advocated, it ceased to exist. At the end of December, 1868, Mr Smyth was appointed editor of the "Peeblesshire Advertiser," a position which he still holds. For many years he was reporter and editor combined, but in 1895 an expert shorthand writer was engaged, and this relieved Mr Smyth to a very great extent of reportorial duties.

In Mr Smyth's young days, daily papers in the provinces were almost entirely unknown. There were a few published twice a week, but the great majority only made their appearance weekly, and were high priced; consequently the number of folk who could afford a paper for themselves was very limited. In country districts, however, newspaper clubs existed, consisting of, perhaps, ten or

usually retentive memory, enabled him to give pretty full reports of speeches at public meetings and other functions which he had to attend. Indeed, he has been frequently complimented on the accuracy of his reports, and surprise has been expressed at his being able to report so faithfully without the aid of shorthand properly so-called. Of Pitman's system, however, he has a high opinion, and in his intercourse with reporters, which, during his fifty years' experience, has been large and varied, he has found that the consensus of opinion has been in favour of Pitman's shorthand, which is practised by all the reporters with whom he has come in contact. He considers that a smart, intelligent young man might do worse than enter the journalistic profession; but in this, as in many other professions nowadays, competition is very keen, and therefore only the best can reach the top. On one occasion Mr Smyth had the



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twelve members, and the paper was handed from one to another, a certain time being allowed for each to peruse its contents, and it was then handed on to the next member. Not infrequently the last reader had a difficulty in gleaning much information from it, owing to its ragged condition. By the removal of the stamp duty all this was changed, for penny papers were then published everywhere, and there were few households that could not boast of having a weekly newspaper for their own use. And now the daily newspaper may be found on the breakfast tables of the majority. A great advance, certainly.

Mr Smyth adopted, at the commencement of his journalistic career, a sort of "longhand-short-hand" system, which he found served his purpose very well. This, combined with a more than

honour of reporting the late Mr W. E. Gladstone. It was during his memorable Mid-Lothian campaign. In passing through Peebles on his way to The Glen, the seat of the Grand Old Man's devoted friend, the late Sir Charles Tennant, he was presented with the freedom of the ancient and royal burgh of Peebles. On a subsequent visit to The Glen, Mr Smyth met the right hon. gentleman, and had the honour of shaking hands and conversing with England's most famous modern statesman.

During the thirty-eight years that Mr Smyth acted as the representative of the Central News he had frequent correspondence with Mr William Saunders, who was the proprietor of that Agency, and who was also successively M.P. for Hull and Walworth in the Liberal interest.

Notwithstanding his long connection with the Press, Mr Smith does not call to mind many amusing episodes. He was, however, when in the "People's Journal" office, involved in a rather ludicrous affair. The "People's Journal" was printed in Dundee, Cupar being a branch office, and sometimes advertisements, which it was necessary to re-write for the compositor, were sent into the Cupar office. One day an advertisement was received from the country of "A fine calving cow for sale." Mr Smyth had to re-write this; but judge of his surprise and indignation when the advertisement appeared in the "Journal" as "A fine calving bull for sale." He immediately requested the Dundee office to send back the copy of that advertisement. When received it was found to be correctly written "calving cow;" the blunder, therefore, originated in the Dundee office; but the proof-reader would not be convinced of his mistake unless he saw the "copy," which was sent back to confront and convict him. The comedy did not end there. On the day of the sale, the owner of the animal, an elderly man from the country, entered the office, and declared that he would not pay a farthing for that "advertisement," which "made a fool of him through town and country." Mr Smyth told him they were going to charge double the usual rate, for such an animal was a curiosity that had never been seen before, and the owner was sure to get a good price for it. After the sale the old gentleman returned to the office in high spirits, paid for his advertisement, and admitted that he had got more for the animal than he had ever expected.

On the occasion of a Parliamentary election in Fifeshire, while Mr Smyth was in Cupar, he considers he did a smart thing. Three candidates were contesting the seat, and Mr Smyth had to follow them to report their meetings day by day for ten days. Ultimately two of the aspirants for Parliamentary honours withdrew from the contest, apparently feeling sure that their candidature was hopeless. Those were the days of "hustings" for Parliamentary elections, and as there was no opposition the candidate left was, of course, certain of being elected. The election was to be at noon on a Friday, and the "People's Journal" was printed in Dundee on that day and delivered at eight o'clock the same evening in Cupar. Mr Smyth was anxious to have the report of the election in the "Journal" on the Friday night, and by making careful inquiries on the Thursday night he was able to write a report of the election proceedings, and post it on to Dundee at eight o'clock on Friday morning, with a qualifying note to put it in type and if anything special should turn up he would wire. Fortunately nothing did turn up, and accordingly the report appeared in the paper when it reached Cupar at eight o'clock. It occupied about half a column, and gave even the names of most of those who were on the hustings. The Cupar people were quite surprised to see so full a report of the election so early, and considered it was a piece of clever telegraphic work. Naturally, neither Mr Smyth nor others "in the know" undeceived the public. This was too risky a business to be repeated, and he has been in the habit since of allowing incidents to develop into actual facts before giving them publicity in print.

As my readers will see, Mr Smyth has had a long and very pleasant journalistic career, and I am sure they will hope, with me, that he has yet many years of work, happiness, and usefulness before him. In the words of Shakespeare he can say—

Therefore my age is as a lusty winter—  
Frosty but kindly; let me go with you  
And I'll do the work of a younger man  
In all your business and necessity.

The foregoing sketch makes no reference to Mr Smyth's musical abilities, and so we quote the following from "Musical Scotland—Past and Present," by David Baptie. After giving details of Mr Smyth's birth, &c., the author says:—

Like not a few others, he was self-taught in music. Having no opportunity of attending music classes, Mr Smyth adopted the plan of paying particular attention to certain intervals between the notes of tunes with which he was familiar, and then applying this knowledge so acquired to tunes he was unacquainted with, and by following out this course by steady perseverance he attained his object so far that by the time he was about sixteen or seventeen years of age he could read any ordinary psalm tune at first sight without difficulty. His next ambition was to be a precentor, but he had another difficulty here to overcome, i.e., a difficulty in properly pronouncing the letter "r." By the exercise of care and perseverance this, too, was vanquished, and at the age of sixteen he officiated in a precentor's desk and continued to do so at intervals until 1850, when he was appointed precentor of the U.P. Church, Pitlessie. He was also several years in the same capacity in the U.P. Church, Kennoway, afterwards at the Parish Church, Orwell, Kinross, which he was invited to accept without a contest. His journalistic work now, however, required his removal to Cupar-Fife, and he accordingly left Orwell, and was appointed to Boston U.P. Church, Cupar. Since 1868 Mr Smyth has resided at Peebles, and is editor of the "Peebleshire Advertiser." For some years after going there he was precentor of the beautiful Parish Church of Manor, but ultimately resigned on account of the distance he had to walk. While at Kettle he attended, in 1857, a music class taught by Mr W. Brechin—the only one he ever attended—and afterwards, at his teacher's request, he also taught Brechin's system in various parts of Fife, and was very successful. He does not now sing in public, but occasionally gives readings, as he has been in the habit of doing, more or less, for the last twenty-five years.

The foregoing was written in 1894, and Mr Smyth now confines himself to his editorial duties, taking little part in public matters, but we trust that he will be long spared to go out and in among the good folks of Peebles, and be blest in the autumn of life with as good health as he has hitherto enjoyed.