

BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF DOWTY

By Tony Woolrich

30/06/2025

The following two contemporary articles and obituary are the only biographical accounts of Dowty so far discovered. Few of his writings appear to have been digitised, and his biography is otherwise obscure.

LONDON SKETCHBOOK LONDON: OCTOBER, 1874,

WHEN *Figaro* was founded, in May, 1870, not only was a novelty in journalism introduced to the public, but more than one writer who was previously unknown as an author, made his public début in the pages of the new paper, and soon secured the favorable approbation of those for whose pleasure and instruction his talents were displayed, The success of these new writers justified the sagacity that secured their hitherto - unknown pens for the columns of the *Figaro*. One of these gentlemen was A. A. Dowty, Esq., whose portrait is here presented to the readers of the SKETCH - BOOK, but who will be better known to them, and to the readers of the *Figaro*, under his now well known and popular pseudonym, "O. P. Q. Philander Smiff, A.S.S., M.U.F.F., S.P.Q.R., Q.E.D., etc." I feel sure that I do but echo the opinions of my fellow - workers in that journal, when I say of "Smiff," as Palmerston said of Peel, "We are all proud of him!" One is always sure of something worth reading, when we meet with that now - familiar signature at the end of an article; and the numerous and very varied contributions that have appeared from Mr. Dowty's fluent pen, during the past four years, have borne witness to the wit and wisdom of their writer, while they must have greatly helped to secure for *Figaro* the popularity that it has obtained,

It is said of Douglas Jerrold, when he was contributing to the *Weekly* Newspaper the series of gossiping articles called "The Barber's Chair" - just republished by Messrs, Chatto and Windus - that the newsboys, in applying at the publishing office of the paper, were accustomed to ask "Any Barber?" and, if there was "No Barber this week," to give their orders accordingly. If the title had not already been used by Douglas Jerrold, it would have been very appropriate for *Figaro*, But if *Figaro* cannot have its "Barber's Chair" by Douglas Jerrold, it possesses the contributions of "Smiff"; and I can imagine the newsboys asking "Any Smiff?" just as they inquired "Any Barber?" years ago,

Mr. Dowty's imaginative records of "Dowty Deeds" in the Franco - German war were admirable burlesques of the letters of the special correspondents of the daily Press, His comic "History of England" is, in many respects, superior to that written by the late Gilbert Abbott A'Beckett - Leech's drawings for which are to be exhibited, this month, at the Pavilion, Brighton; and its popularity has been proved by the large sale of the several editions of the work in its separate form as a shilling volume, His similar "History of France," so far as it has gone, is as smartly written as its predecessor; its interspersed disquisitions on family events and other matters not being its least amusing portions, The series of highly diverting and outrageously humorous papers, now also republished in a shilling volume, under the title of "Figaro's Natural History," were also marked by the same exuberant fancy and frolicsome fun, In the numerous miscellaneous papers of Mr. Dowty, the various members of the Smiff family and household are delineated with so much graphic power, that the reader seems at once to recognise them as veritable personages with whom he has long been intimately acquainted.

"Smiff" is, undoubtedly - or, as he might prefer to write it, un - Dowty'dly - a thoroughly original humorist, and is no copier of any other writer. His jokes and witticisms are the emanations of his own prolific fancy, and he has no need to borrow from others, He has also shown much versatile power in the numerous productions of his pen, He was the author of most of those very impressive poetical romances which from time to time appeared under the title of "Coster Ballads," It will, I think, be a surprise to many - I confess that it was so to me to be told that "Smiff" is also the author of the charming series of papers, signed "A Young and Happy Husband," and published under the title "Connubial Bliss," This fact, however, shows the versatility of Mr. Dowty, and also his power to place vividly before his reader domestic scenes of happy love and wedded life, which are not without passages of true pathos. To hundreds of readers, the loves of Arthur and Alice appeared to be the real transcripts of an actual experience; so much so, that when the birth of the baby was described, more than one sympathising reader forwarded to the Figaro office a present for "the little stranger." As Mr. Dowty was unmarried, and as Arthur, Alice, and the Baby were only creations of his own brain, he must have been much amused, as well as flattered, by these testimonies to his powers as an author, Mr. Dowty is only in his twenty - seventh year, so we may hope that he will be spared for many years to come, to amuse and instruct an ever - widening circle of readers with the productions of his ready pen,

CUTHBERT BEDE, (pseudonym of Edward Bradley (1827 - 1889))

THE BIOGRAPH AND REVIEW, 1 (Jan.-June 1879) pp 271-275
AGLEN A. DOWTY ("PHILANDER SMIFF").

IT is now nearly nine years ago since an article appeared in the *London Figaro*, then in its first youth, to which was appended the somewhat outlandish signature "O. P. Q. Philander Smiff." Since that date few numbers of that paper have appeared from which "Smiff's" name has been absent; and this energetic, crafty, good - tempered, and we fear it must be added not altogether high - principled, old man, has meanwhile come to be so generally regarded as an existing reality that it will doubtless surprise all but the initiated few to learn that he is purely a creature of the imagination.

"Philander Smiff," in fact, is merely a nom de plume assumed by Mr. Aglen A. Dowty, a gentleman who, though now for some years connected with journalism, is, like so many other contemporary writers, a member of Her Majesty's Civil Service. Born at the close of 1846 [sic 1847] in the West Somersetshire town of Bridgewater, he had shown no sign of literary aptitude, when, in his fifteenth year, a severe accident met with whilst skating, at once stopped the course of his education, and changed, as it turned out, all his plans for the future. He was reading at the time for the matriculation examination at the London University, but the complex nature of his injuries, and the long and tedious illness that ensued, summarily stopped his studies, and as it then seemed, threatened to cripple him for life.

It was whilst lying helpless on his back that he was driven by sheer ennui to try his hand at verse - making, and for a time he most diligently supplied the "Poet's Corner" of the local journal with lines on all conceivable topics. Waxing bolder with practice, he one day polished a set of verses with unusual care, and wondering at his own audacity, sent them to Mr. Tom Hood, who was then the editor of *Fun*. His surprise was indeed great to receive a letter from Mr. Hood a few days later not only accepting the verses, but taking the pains to criticise them most carefully, and adding most valuable words of advice and encouragement.

The sick youth, who had formed a very different notion of the stony - hearted and unapproachable London editor, could scarcely believe in his good fortune, to have thus, unknown and unintroduced, obtained a footing on a Metropolitan journal. He was naturally greatly encouraged; and thanks to a similarly kind reception his "copy" gained at the hands of Mr. S. O. Beeton, he was soon busily engaged in turning out verses, short stories, essays, and other miscellaneous contributions for a not inconsiderable number of the magazines and periodicals of the day. These were characterised by a grateful freshness and originality which made them alike acceptable to editors eager for novelty and to appreciative readers.

It was in this way that Mr. Dowty drifted, as it were, into literature; and finding he possessed a hearty relish for the work, he determined with returning health to seek his fortune in the Great City. Mistrusting his powers, however, he first availed himself of a nomination for the Paymaster - General's Department in Whitehall; and then, coming up to town, he passed successfully a competitive examination at the Civil Service Commission, and began life in earnest. This was in 1867, shortly before he came of age

For a year or two he worked away steadily after office hours, enlarging his literary connection; but it was not until the *London Figaro* was started by Mr. James Mortimer, in 1870, that he really found the opportunity he had unconsciously been awaiting. Struck with the brightness and novelty of the new journal, Mr. Dowty lost no time in sending in some contributions, which were at once accepted. His first article appeared in the fifth number of the paper, and since then, as has been said, scarcely a number has appeared. to which he has not contributed.

Of all the work he has done for the *Figaro*, the "Smiff" papers have undoubtedly been the most and perhaps most deservedly popular, though a series of sketches, since republished in a volume, with the title of "*Connubial Bliss*," and his "*Coster Ballads*," have also secured more than an ephemeral success. It would be difficult to say upon what subject the versatile "Philander" has not written, and written with a humour and sprightliness wonderfully fascinating. His *histories of England and France*, his "*Natural History*," his experiences as father and shopkeeper, as a wax works proprietor, as dining room keeper, and as special correspondent, by no means exhaust the work he has done since 1870, which on the ground of versatility alone is something astonishing. The "*History of England*" has proved permanently popular, for it is now in its seventh edition, more than 50,000 copies having been sold. As a proof of the interest excited amongst his readers by the fortunes of the loving couple who are the hero and heroine of "*Connubial Bliss*," it may be mentioned that at the time it was announced that a little "Alice" had come to town, white satin ' pincushions, and baby's boots and hoods, and congratulatory letters without end were sent to "Alice and Arthur," whom the public persisted in regarding as of real flesh and blood.

At the time, too, when the "coop" in his back yard formed the subject of "Smiff's" letters to the *Figaro*, the office was turned temporarily into an emporium for live stock, so numerous were the presents sent up of rabbits, fowls, guinea - pigs, and other creatures, destined by their donors to be kept in the said coop, which we need scarcely say had, equally with "Alice and Arthur," and "Smiff" himself, no existence save in their author's imagination..

On another occasion, when " Smiff " had been pouring out his soul by reason of domestic trials, brought about to a large extent by the unruliness of his three sons, a

letter was sent to him offering to give him a presentation for "Georgie-porgie," the "pickle" of the family, to the Bluecoat School.

An exceptional compliment was paid to the evergreen "Philander" at the Gaiety Theatre on the production of the "*Bohemian G'yurl*," when it was found that Mr. Royce, who played the mysterious nobleman, had "made up" as the exact counterpart of "Smiff," as he is drawn by the Figaro artist. The fidelity of the likeness was proved by the shout of "Bravo, Smiffy!" with which the actor was hailed on his first appearance by the appreciative "gods." In March of this year the "*Bohemian G'yurl*" was revived, and "Smiff" was again seen before the footlights, to the delight of the audience.

Mr. Dowty has not confined himself to the *Figaro*, however, but has been connected with many other journals. For some years he has been on the leader - staff of one of the morning papers, and more than once has acted as the special correspondent of the *Daily News*. But his official duties interfered with his progress in the latter path of journalism, and he had reluctantly to withdraw from it. To what may be called fugitive comic literature Mr. Dowty is a ready and fertile contributor. For some years he has been associated with Mr. William Sawyer in the production of *Funny Folks*, and the marvellous vitality and success of that journal may be attributed in no small degree to his admirable collaboration.

Allusion may here be made to a pleasing freak of Mr. Dowty's youth, which resulted in the creation of what may be called the satirical annual. The furore created by his parody of Tennyson's "*Idylls of the King*" was absolutely startling. It was attended, however, with results in the way of imitation, degenerating into the most objectionable forms, which the young man had never contemplated; and like "Fear," in Collins's famous ode, he "shrank afraid, e'en from the sound himself had made," and wisely quitted at once a perilous and compromising path, his success in which he has already learnt to look back on with apologetic regret. Still, the success of this freak was in itself evidence of genius. It is much to be regretted that Mr. Dowty should have lavished his powers on ephemeral contributions to the periodical press. He is capable of bright, original, and enduring work. Either as a dramatist or novelist, he might achieve great things; but the promise of an early farce and extravaganza has not been fulfilled by any subsequent dramatic achievement, while "Smiff" remains the sole creation of a humourist from whom, more than from any of the young men of the day, a "Pickwick" might have been reasonably expected.

OBITUARY

TRUTH, 25 July 1906. Pp 195-6

With deep regret I have to record the death of Mr Artemas Aglen Dowty, which took place at Horley on Wednesday last. Mr Dowty had been a member of the staff of *Truth* from the first appearance of this journal, and it is a somewhat remarkable circumstance that he is the first of the original staff who has been removed by death, with the exception of the late Mr Grenville Murray, who died quite in the early days of the paper. During nearly thirty years he has been a constant contributor in verse and prose, and his pen will be missed as much by the readers of *Truth* as by its editor. Except for one year, when his health failed him, he wrote the whole of the *Truth Christmas Numbers*, and his collaboration with Sir Carruthers Gould produced some of the most popular and successful of them. But he was an invaluable all-round journalist, and could turn his hand to any work with good effect. Some years ago, being in need of an art critic, I asked him to fill the gap on an emergency, and he did so well he has continued ever since.

Mr Dowty first made a mark as a journalist as “O. P. Q. Smiff” in the old *London Figaro*, and the “Comic History of England” and “Comic Natural History” which he contributed to that paper were good enough to be successfully republished in book form. He became really famous — though it was only anonymous fame — with the production of “The coming of K—” the most successful of Beeton’s Christmas Annuals “The Siliad” and other annuals in the same series were also Mr Dowty’s work.

There was a vast amount of speculation at the time as to the authorship of “The coming of K—” and “The Siliad” and it would have been a surprise to the public and everybody else to have discovered the venomous author in the smiling unobtrusive clerk in the Paymaster-General's Office — for Mr Dowty was a Civil Servant, and like a good many of his colleagues, found no difficulty in combining active journalism with the punctual discharge of his official duties, He had indeed, not a particle of venom in his nature, and was one of the most modest as well as the most amiable of men. No one who knew him can fail to deplore his death as deeply as I do myself, in company with all his colleagues.