

George Smeaton is known to most readers by the Banner of Truth reprints of his books, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, *Christ's Doctrine of the Atonement* and *The Apostle's Doctrine of the Atonement* — all of them careful and illuminating expositions of the biblical material. He wrote in the mid-Victorian period when biblical criticism was undermining these doctrines. Subtle influences are having a similar effect today so that Smeaton's work is again proving a helpful bulwark.

Keddie has produced a work of impeccable scholarship; and unlike some scholars who become increasingly obscure, he has used his learning to clarify matters. This is altogether a superb book, beautifully produced and illustrated, and one which all ministers would profit from reading. Buy it for your pastor!

*Evangelicals Now*, review by Paul E. G. Cook

Rev. John Keddie introduces us to George Smeaton — the man, and the theologian. Although he was Professor of Exegetical Theology in New College Edinburgh from 1857–1889, surprisingly little is known of this eminent theologian today in Reformed circles. This volume seeks to redress that imbalance.

The book begins by taking us through his early life and ministry, till he eventually arrived in New College in 1857. It deals honestly with the turbulent times of controversy experienced by the Free Church in the later nineteenth century, giving us the perspective of George Smeaton on these difficulties.

This book is much more than just an historical account of George Smeaton. It is an excellent read, and one that might enthrall you also to read more of George Smeaton's printed works. I heartily recommend this superb book to as wide a readership as possible.

*Free Church Witness*, review by Richard Ross

George Smeaton (1814–1889) was a leading theologian in nineteenth-century Scotland. Although his books, particularly those on the atonement and the Holy Spirit, have been reprinted several times, little has been written about Smeaton's life. In light of the fact that he is often overshadowed by contemporaries like Chalmers, M'Cheyne, the Bonars, and Buchanan (remarkable men in their own right). This biography is a welcome contribution on a man of massive intellect and ardent devotion that deserves to be better known.

Reformation Heritage Books, note by Joel R. Beeke

Who was George Smeaton? Some may never have heard of him, while others know him only as the author of two books — one on the atonement and one on the Holy Spirit. There has never been a biography of his life, and therefore comparatively little is known of him. This book largely rectifies the situation. John Keddie sets before us the life and ministry of this man, and his contribution to the challenges and demands of his day.

This book has chapters on subjects such as union controversy, Bible criticism, worship innovations, inspiration, the atonement and the Holy Spirit, all of which are relevant and helpful contributions to our current thinking. But the overriding feature that stands out in the life of this learned theologian is his walk with God.

There is much profit in this book and it is highly recommended.

*Evangelical Times*, review by David Budgen

# *George Smeaton*

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Learned theologian and biblical scholar

John W. Keddie



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Cover picture:

George Smeaton

An undated CDV owned by Matthew J. Hyde, coloured by Yusuf Tolga Ünker

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Illustrations:

We would like to thank David Davidson for kind permission to reproduce the photos of Oliphant and Aileen Smeaton, and the Martyrs United Free Church Session. The *carte de visite* portraits of Samuel Miller, James Begg, Horatius Bonar, William Nixon, William Robertson Smith, William Cunningham, together with the autographs, bookplate, the frontispiece and cover portraits (also p. 140) of George Smeaton are all from the personal collection of Matthew J. Hyde.

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# Preface

George Smeaton began his *Memoir of Alexander Thomson of Banchory* with this expansive view of the apostolic faith:

Christianity is destined not only to save the individual, but to fill and ennoble all art and all science, and all literature. Vessels to contain the heavenly treasure, they receive their highest consecration by being made subservient to this end.<sup>1</sup>

By such a view of the Christian faith, George Smeaton himself, the subject of this biographical sketch, lived.

Besides his invaluable, superb books on the atonement<sup>2</sup> and the Holy Spirit,<sup>3</sup> happily reprinted in recent years, not much is known about George Smeaton. There is a very brief one-page ‘sketch’ of his life by W. J. Grier in the 1958 reprint of Smeaton’s work on the Holy Spirit, and an entry from Ian Hamilton in the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (1993). These rely almost entirely on the Church of Scotland *Fasti* and Free Church Annals. This present biography, first published in 2007, was the first full biography of George Smeaton.

In a lecture at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 1939, Principal John Macleod of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, said that Smeaton’s ‘work as a theologian still awaits a worthy appraisalment’.<sup>4</sup> In a measure this is still true, although there have been

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<sup>1</sup> George Smeaton, *Memoir of Alexander Thomson of Banchory* (Edinburgh, 1869), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by Christ Himself* (1868, first ed.; 1871, second ed.); *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by the Apostles* (1870).

<sup>3</sup> George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (1882, first ed.; 1889, second ed.).

<sup>4</sup> John Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, (Edinburgh, 1946, second ed.), p.289. John Macleod (1872–1948) was a professor in various Chairs in the Free Church College, Edinburgh, after 1906 up to his retirement in 1942. He was Principal of the college between 1927 and 1942. This was the theological college of the continuing Free Church after 1900 and should not be confused with New College, which at that date became the college of the United Free Church. The United Free Church came about as a result of a union of the majority of the Free

several lengthy theses produced on aspects of Smeaton's theology.<sup>5</sup> John Macleod's opinion of Smeaton was that, 'Next to [William] Cunningham, he stood as our foremost student of the history of the Reformed theology.'<sup>6</sup> James MacGregor, a younger colleague of Smeaton's at New College, reputedly said that Smeaton had 'the best-constituted theological intellect in Christendom'.<sup>7</sup>

It is fair to say that until the reprinting of his major works in the second part of the twentieth century, next to nothing would be known in church circles about Smeaton or his views. The first reprint of his work in the twentieth century was *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by Christ Himself*, produced by Zondervan in 1953.<sup>8</sup> Around that same time an American student, Homer Lehr Goddard, produced a PhD thesis at Edinburgh University on *The Contribution of George Smeaton (1814–89) to Theological Thought*. In his thesis Goddard covers four areas of Smeaton's thought — inspiration, the atonement, church and state, and the Holy Spirit. It is the only thesis so far that has sought to cover all the important aspects of George Smeaton's work. Though Goddard is broadly sympathetic in his examination of the subject, he does not approach his

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Church and the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1900. Reference to this Church union is made to this in Chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> See the Bibliography, Special Studies section.

<sup>6</sup> Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, p.288. Macleod refers here to William Cunningham (1805–61), Professor of Church History (1845–61) and Principal (1847–61) at New College, Edinburgh, the theological hall of the Free Church of Scotland which had emerged after the 'Disruption' from the Church of Scotland in 1843. Cunningham's major books on *Historical Theology* (two volumes, 1862) and *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862) have been reprinted by the Banner of Truth Trust in recent years.

<sup>7</sup> Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, p.289. As with many of the details in Macleod's excellent work, the source of this anecdote is not given. James MacGregor (1830–94), a native of Callander, Perthshire, was professor of systematic theology in New College, Edinburgh, between 1868 and 1881. He emigrated to New Zealand in 1881 and became minister of Columba Church, Oamaru (1882–94), in the Synod of Otago and Southland. MacGregor was a conservative theologian though erratic at some points, such as his strange support for William Robertson Smith, though he had no sympathy with the higher critics!

<sup>8</sup> See the Bibliography, Books and Pamphlets section.



## Preface

task from a distinctly conservative standpoint, but rather as one who is happy with at least some of the tenets of modern biblical criticism and liberal theology.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequently, there have been at least three other doctoral theses focussing, at least in part, on the theological writings of George Smeaton. The most thorough of these is the PhD thesis entitled *Atonement and Pneumatology: A Study in the Theology of George Smeaton*, by Norman Paul Madsen and submitted to the University of St Andrews in 1974. In this work of 343 pages, Madsen deals very thoroughly — and on the whole helpfully — with Smeaton's theology, especially in relation to the atonement and the work of the Holy Spirit. Much of his analysis, however, is taken up with comparing and contrasting Smeaton's theology in these areas with the views of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, and in general with neo-orthodox theologians. It is clear that Madsen would have liked more recognition to have been given by Smeaton to the 'human subject' in his theological activity and not so much to have 'confined himself to the scriptural witness'.<sup>10</sup> Smeaton's concern, however, was 'not to go beyond the scope of the scriptural books in formulating his evangelical theology'.<sup>11</sup> He cannot be pressed into a neo-orthodox mould.

The most recent doctoral thesis on the theological thought of George Smeaton is Robert Shillaker's, *The Federal Pneumatology of George Smeaton (1814–89)*, produced in 2002. It is clear that Shillaker writes from the same Reformed theological tradition as Smeaton. It is a detailed piece of work which focuses on some central themes in Smeaton's theological position. He covers some areas related to what is called federal theology and the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to these areas. What is meant by federal theology was well stated by Smeaton himself:

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<sup>9</sup> H. L. Goddard, *The Contribution of George Smeaton (1814–89) to Theological Thought*, PhD thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1953). Goddard's thesis is dated 1953, although the PhD was not awarded until 1960.

<sup>10</sup> N. P. Madsen, *Atonement and Pneumatology: A Study in the Theology of George Smeaton*, PhD thesis (University of St Andrew's, 1974), p.73.

<sup>11</sup> Madsen, *Atonement and Pneumatology*, p.32.

It is due to the federal theology to state that it was only meant to ground and establish the undoubtedly scriptural doctrine of the two Adams (Rom. 5:12–20; 1 Cor. 15:47) ... No one can doubt, who examines the federal theology, that the design of those who brought that scheme of thought into general reception in the Reformed church for two centuries was principally to ground, and to put on a sure basis, the idea of the two Adams; that is, to show that there were, in reality, only two men in history, and only two great facts on which the fortunes of the race hinged.<sup>12</sup>

‘What this means,’ Shillaker contends, ‘is that when Adam sinned and fell, soon after his creation, the result was passed to all humanity because he was their representative. Christ, the second Adam, who was the other federal representative in the scheme, remedied the situation through the incarnation and his atoning work on the cross.’<sup>13</sup> The thesis is a fairly technical study of distinctive areas in Smeaton’s theology in connection with the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to Adam and Christ. Shillaker’s main conclusion is that ‘Smeaton provides a coherent theory, which does not contradict the tradition of Reformed theology in which he stands.’<sup>14</sup> Apart from the fact that no biography of him was ever written, there are probably two main reasons why Smeaton is so little-known today. On the one hand, he was not an ecclesiastical politician. He rarely took part in General Assemblies and, indeed, it is hard to find any reference to him in the contemporary Minutes of Assemblies.<sup>15</sup> No doubt an involvement in

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<sup>12</sup> Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by Christ Himself* (Edinburgh, 1871, second ed.), p.439.

<sup>13</sup> R. M. Shillaker, *The Federal Pneumatology of George Smeaton (1814–89)*, PhD thesis (Highland Theological College, 2002), p.1. ‘Federal’ is from the Latin *foedus*, meaning ‘covenant’. ‘Pneumatology’ is from a Greek word *pneuma* which means (among other things) ‘Spirit’, and thus *pneumatology* refers to the doctrine and work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> Shillaker, *Federal Pneumatology*, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> In a presbyterian church such as the Church of Scotland or Free Church of Scotland, the General Assembly is the supreme ruling body. It meets once a year and comprises representatives of ministers and elders from throughout the church. Normally one minister in three or four would attend in any year, with one elder appointed for each minister. The church is made up of presbyteries

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ecclesiastical politics gives a certain spice to a man's career, and therefore provides appealing material for the biographer. Whether or not that is a good thing is another question. The prominence of the 'ecclesiastical politician' has not been particularly associated with times of revival in the churches. Smeaton, clearly, had no taste for the cut and thrust of Assembly debates, nor ambitions as a 'committee man'. In an obituary notice in *The Scotsman*, it was said that, 'He was not an ecclesiastic in the ordinary acceptance of the term. His interest lay not in presbytery or Assembly polemics, but in gospel preaching and quiet study.'<sup>16</sup>

The second reason for neglect is probably the fact that in the late nineteenth century, generally speaking, the rising generation of divinity students became impatient with the older orthodoxy. The old orthodoxy wasn't exciting enough. What was desired was something new and 'progressive'. Several teachers in theological faculties came under the influence of higher critical theories which had come to prominence on the Continent. Besides this, many Free Church students studied in Continental faculties in the second half of the nineteenth century and came under the influence of the theories then prevalent in Germany and Holland. This had the effect of shifting the position the church had held on the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture. It also served to shunt large parts of the church into a spiritual wilderness of a sterile scholarship and a liberal theology. The critical movement tended to fall in with the growing evolutionary views of nature. This brought pressure to de-emphasize or marginalize the supernatural elements of biblical faith. After 1859 the world went after Charles Darwin's theory of evolution with ever-increasing acceptance and sophistication. This had a profound impact on critical studies in religion. The critics overlaid the biblical history with the evolutionary ideas. Ultimately, it transformed a spiritual religion into a simply social gospel.

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corresponding to congregations within given geographical areas by which the country is divided up for practical purposes. The presbyteries would appoint the ministers and elders to the General Assemblies. Presbyteries oversee the work of the congregations within their area and are made up of ministers and elders (one for each congregation) from each of these local congregations.

<sup>16</sup> *The Scotsman*, 15 April 1889, p.7.

Smeaton, though not prominently, was one of the few concerned voices raised against such trends in biblical studies. To many students, however, he was an anachronism. Revealingly, Homer Goddard says of Smeaton's position that, 'The most damaging criticism of Smeaton is that he seldom presents a fresh theological concept or view point. He therefore stirs up little antagonism, being considered by many to be one of the old school!'<sup>17</sup> It will be recognized that it was Smeaton's *position* with which issue is taken, and Goddard simply shows his own bias at this point. In terms of breadth of knowledge and acquaintance with the theological literature of the day, it is doubtful that Smeaton could be matched by any other nineteenth-century theologian. 'It ought not to be overlooked,' said Malcolm Kinnear, with reference to Smeaton's volumes on the atonement, that

Smeaton's two books were the first comprehensive, scholarly, exegetical analysis of the New Testament teaching on the atonement from a British author in this period, and in thoroughness and detail his work has not been paralleled since in the English language. Smeaton was a learned man of deep religious insight, and this will not go unnoticed by careful readers of his work.<sup>18</sup>

More recently in an MTh thesis, Andrew Longwe has drawn attention to Smeaton's purpose in writing his works on the Atonement:

... his twin works were designed to be a comprehensive Biblical theological examination of the New Testament's doctrine of the atonement. Significantly, Smeaton viewed his twin work as making an important contribution to atonement studies because no one had yet carried out an exhaustive academic Biblical theological study of Christ's sayings or an exhaustive academic Biblical theological study of the apostles' sayings on the atonement.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Goddard, pp.181–2.

<sup>18</sup> M. A. Kinnear, *Scottish New Testament Scholarship and the Atonement, c.1845–1920*, PhD thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1995), p.179. The third chapter of this thesis deals specifically with 'George Smeaton and the development of the Calvinist view of the atonement' (pp.124–79).

<sup>19</sup> Andrew G. H. Longwe, *George Smeaton (1814–1889) and his Novum Organum*:

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Longwe maintains that,

Smeaton should be applauded by Scottish Reformed theologians today for the way he capably and resourcefully combined insights from modern continental Biblical scholarship with the classical Reformed tradition to expound a rich and thoroughly Biblical theological understanding of the atonement. His *novum organum* of theology deserves to be widely recognised. Indeed, his forgotten innovation provides both Biblical scholars and thinking Christians with an excellent model of investigation.<sup>20</sup>

As he saw it,

Smeaton brought together the theology of the Reformed orthodoxy with the methods of academic Biblical theology and its distinctive insights. Moreover, he did this whilst living in a milieu that was increasingly and rapidly modifying and rejecting Biblical authority. The present author believes that ... Smeaton deserves to be recognised as a model Scottish Biblical scholar – although he would have certainly not claimed that his contribution was the final word on the topic.<sup>21</sup>

We have a glimpse of this in Smeaton's monumental book, *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by Christ Himself* (1871). The 'Appendix of notes and historical elucidations' at the end of that volume cannot but convince the reader of his immense learning and rigorous critical interaction with the literature of the day.<sup>22</sup> Sadly, since Smeaton's day theological science has been largely dominated in Scottish theological faculties by neo-orthodox and modernist views. There has been an evident tendency in the churches to seek status through scholarship which has often compromised the supernatural and divine elements in the biblical faith.

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*Biblical Theology and Reformed Orthodoxy* (MTh thesis, University of Glasgow in partnership with Edinburgh Theological Seminary, 2020), p.105. '*Novum Organum*' means 'new method' or 'new instrument'.

<sup>20</sup> Longwe, *George Smeaton (1814–1889) and his Novum Organum*, p.172.

<sup>21</sup> Longwe, *George Smeaton (1814–1889) and his Novum Organum*, p.172-73.

<sup>22</sup> Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by Christ Himself* (1871, second ed.), pp.415–96.

There has also tended to be reliance on man's wit and wisdom, rather than upon the work of the Holy Spirit. Such tendencies have been a snare and even a death wish for the church, because they have tended to produce a man-centred religion which denies the supernatural. Such attitudes, then — in ecclesiastical politics and in worldly scholarship — have arguably had a devastating effect, spiritually speaking, on the church in Scotland and elsewhere in the twentieth century. The deterioration in church life in the West is not unrelated to the nineteenth-century 'watershed' which was constituted by a distinct shift in attitudes towards the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures as a divine record of a divine revelation.

George Smeaton, then, was a diffident man as far as church courts were concerned. He did not have a prominent career in church affairs. Rather he devoted himself to his work of preaching and teaching, to which the Lord had called him. His task, as he saw it, was to encourage among the rising generations of ministers a right understanding and handling of the Word of God. The effective denial by so many of received views of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture caused him great pain in his later years. He was exercised about the consequences of such defection, not least in terms of departure from historic Calvinism and orthodox, biblical Christian faith.

Though he was not a controversialist by nature, George Smeaton was inevitably drawn into controversies as the Free Church slowly but surely changed its position in the latter part of the nineteenth century, especially in relation to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. There is no doubt that Smeaton was a man of eirenic and gracious spirit. Nevertheless, as occasion demanded he raised his voice against the liberalizing trends of his times. It was said in the obituary notice approved by the Free Church General Assembly of 1889 that, 'He took little part in the business of church courts, and but seldom descended into the arena of controversy; yet he held decided opinions and gave no uncertain sound on the debated questions which from time to time arise in the church.'

In assessing his life in the church, it is inevitable that his attitudes towards controversial issues will come to the forefront. It was a period of downgrade from the old orthodoxy. In the light of this, his opinions on

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such debated issues assume considerable importance, not least in view of his position in a chair of a major theological college of the day. It is not known what became of Smeaton's papers or books, though, apparently, most of his considerable library was donated to the New College Library, Edinburgh. At the time of his death there was one surviving son, Oliphant, who had emigrated to New Zealand in 1878 and pursued a career first in teaching and then in journalism and writing. Oliphant Smeaton returned to Scotland and occupied the family home after his mother's death in 1893. Though a prolific writer, the only thing he wrote about his father appears to have been the few pages he contributed to William Knight's *Some Nineteenth-Century Scotsmen*, under the title 'Professor Smeaton and his colleagues'.<sup>23</sup> He had charge of his father's papers, but what became of them is not now known. Apart from two handwritten notebooks, one on Sabbath observance, and the other containing notes on books, surprisingly little Smeaton memorabilia is to be found in New College.

This present biographical work is largely original. There is not an abundance of suitable extant and available material to the prospective biographer. The author is, however, indebted to many individuals for help received in various ways in completing this work. Thanks are expressed to the Committee of the Free Church School in Theology for requesting the author to present a paper on George Smeaton at the 2003 school. That served as a spur to contemplate a fuller biography. Indebtedness is acknowledged to the staff at New College Library, Edinburgh, for willing assistance in so many ways in this project. I am thankful to the Evangelical Press (EP Books) for undertaking the initial publication of this biography. I am in addition thankful to Ettrick Press for undertaking this present new edition, which has involved the minimum of changes to the text and the inclusion of some new illustrations, some kindly provided by Smeaton's descendants.

At a personal level it has been a challenging but stimulating and spiritually edifying experience to put together this short biography of one

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<sup>23</sup> William Knight, *Some Nineteenth-Century Scotsmen* (Edinburgh and London, 1903), pp.108–15.

*George Smeaton*

of the foremost of Reformed theologians. George Smeaton was a man of God, a faithful minister of the gospel, and an accomplished New Testament scholar. It is fitting that lovers of the truth should have rediscovered his major works in more recent times. He has rested from his labours, but his works follow him. It is the prayer and desire of this writer that this work might serve as a fitting tribute to one of the ablest of Scottish divines. The concern in the work has been to bring out not only the salient features of a life lived in the service of the Saviour, but also from his various writings to let him speak to the present generation. It is this author's hope and prayer that this may provide a stimulus today to faithfulness to the Lord in sound theological thinking and practical Christian living. This was Smeaton's own desire in his life's work. There are many lessons for our own witness-bearing to the truth today from the life of such a man of God. We are challenged to follow in his steps, as he followed in Christ's.

Smeaton was not one to be 'carried about with various and strange doctrines'. He was a precious gift of God to the church, 'whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever' (Heb. 13:7-8). George Smeaton exemplified the truth: 'It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace' (Heb. 13:9). From the standpoint of the classic Reformed theology, he 'served his own generation by the will of God' (Acts 13:36). His whole desire in his ministry was to serve the Lord. To the Lord alone be the glory.

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