

11. 6. 86,  
Dear Susan Woodrow, this to be submitted  
to A.D.B. - thanks for your help.  
Ramsay Smith ext. 6756

BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH OF WILLIAM RAMSAY SMITH

William Ramsay Smith (1859-1937), Physician, Naturalist, Anthropologist and Government Servant, son of William Smith, farm servant, and Mary McDonald, domestic servant, was born at King Edward, Aberdeenshire on November, 17th, 1859. He attended Cairnbanno Madras Public School for four years. Thereafter he was apprenticed as a teacher. He began his studies in the Faculty of Arts at Edinburgh University in 1877 and registered as a medical student on the 10th May, 1884. During his medical course he taught in natural history and zoology at the Edinburgh University until 1891. He graduated B.Sc. (Natural Sciences) in 1888 and M.B.,C.M. in 1892. Shortly after graduation he entered private practice at Ryl. He was awarded the M.D. degree by Edinburgh University in 1913 (by thesis - "Medical Jurisprudence from the judicial standpoint"). In 1904 he graduated D.Sc. from the University of Adelaide (by thesis - "Echinococcus Multilocularis").

In May 1896 he defied the published cautions issued by the British Medical Association and accepted appointment as Physician at the (Royal) Adelaide Hospital which was bereft of Honorary Medical Staff, all of whom had resigned after a dispute with the Government (the hospital row). On July 16th 1896 a special meeting of the

South Australian Branch of the British Medical Association passed a resolution "... that this Branch of the B.M.A. views the conduct of Drs. Napier (the surgeon accompanying Smith) and Smith, in accepting positions on the Hospital staff in the Adelaide Hospital in the face of the expressed opinion of the Profession both in England and in the Colony, as being highly dishonourable and unprofessional". The following year they were expelled from the Association and they were not readmitted. They had arrived in Adelaide on July 26th, 1896. Six weeks later the four resident medical officers of the hospital charged Smith and Napier with professional incompetence. After an open enquiry by the Board of Management of the Hospital (and subsequently by a Select Committee of the Legislative Council) one of the resident doctors was dismissed and the others were allowed to resign. Smith and Napier were cleared of all charges. Napier's further career was unmeritorious. In 1899 Smith was granted leave to serve in the South African War (Surgeon Captain, Imperial Bushman's Corps). On his return he was appointed Physician to the Infectious Disease Unit at the Adelaide Hospital, City Coroner and Inspector of Anatomy. In August, 1903 he was suspended from his coronial duties after charges of misusing human bodies had been laid against him. The Government set up a special enquiry. Smith was defended by Sir Josiah Symon (qv Vol. X) who castigated the hostile medical witnesses. Smith was cleared; he relinquished the Inspectorship of Anatomy and his position at the hospital but he remained City Coroner and Chairman of the recently formed Central

Board of Health, a position he held until his retirement in 1929. Smith made contributions in many fields. In 1903 he was appointed Major, and Principal Medical Officer, of the Commonwealth Military Forces in South Australia . He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1906 and he commanded the No.1 A.G.H. at Heliopolis in 1915.

Perhaps unique among Australian coroners his medical statements from the bench were pedagogical, informed, incisive and objective. He wrote "A Manual for Coroners" long regarded as a standard text on the subject. Despite the stigma attached to his arrival by the medical profession he administered his duties without fear, favour or rancour. He was a conscientious, effective and diligent public servant. He was a member of the Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and he had a great interest in the Australian Aborigine. He was a major contributor to the section dealing with Aborigines in the Australian Encyclopedia (1925-1926). His photographs of the Aborigines at the mouth of the Murray River are housed in the South Australian collection; they are the only pictorial record extant of that ancient tribe. In 1924 he published "In Southern Seas" which, despite the title, is largely devoted to Aborigines. Recognising the passing of pure blood Aborigines he recorded their folklore in his last book "Myths of the Australian Aborigines" published 1930. While the accuracy of this work has been criticised, there is no doubt that, by his zeal for the

recording and the preservation of specimens, he had the mark of a trained natural scientist. He died at Belair on 28th September, 1937, being survived by a son and four daughters. He was cremated the following day and his ashes were scattered.

Student records, Edinb. Univ., British Medical J., 18 April 1896; Australasian Medical Gazette, 20 August 1897; Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Adelaide Hospital, 17 December 1896; Advertiser (Adel), 14 August 1903; Register (Adel), 23 September 1903; Honorary Magistrate, April 1914; C.E.W. Bean, Australian Official War History, Vol. 2; H.T. Burgess (ed), Cyclopedia of South Australia 1 (Adel, 1907); B.M.A. (S.A. Branch) Minute Book.

10th June, 1986.