

LH89(E)

Peter Smart - Puritan Divine
by Peter Hinman (1999-2000)

“Peter, preach downe vaine rites with flagrant harte;
Thy guerdon shall be greate, though heare thou Smart”
(Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot)



Peter Smart was an eminent sixteenth century Puritan divine, born in Lighthorne in 1569, probably at the Old Rectory, Old Westfield Farm, Curacy Farm or at Church Hill Farm. The latter may have served as the rectory before the present “Old Rectory” was built. His father, William Smart is believed to have been a local man, in the Terrier of 1585 he states “I enjoynge myne owne proper tythes to my selfe, breade theron”. This is taken to indicate he owned his own land by right of birth, in addition to the church lands for which he was responsible. There is a piece of land which bore the name “Parsons Piece” until it was de-hedged and incorporated in Three Gates Field.

According to the Ecclesiastical Terrier of 1585, Peter was the third of five sons of the parson, William Smart. The eldest was William Smart of Trinity College, Oxford (MA – 7th July 1584). The second son was Humphrey Smart, who matriculated from Trinity College in 1582 and proceeded to obtain a BA from Broadgates Hall (now Pembroke College) on 31st January 1586. The third son was Peter Smart. Nothing is known of the fourth son, except that he was “with my elder son at learning”. (He may have been Daniel Smart, Vicar of Oxhill, Warwickshire, in 1624). The fifth son, Exechias Smart, matriculated from Broadgates Hall in 1585 (*Dictionary of National Biography*).

Peter Smart studied at Westminster school with Richard Neile (later Bishop of Durham) under Gabriel Goodman and Edward Grant. On 25th October 1588, aged 19, he matriculated as a *butler*, or poor scholar, at Broadgates Hall (now Pembroke College, Oxford) and was elected to a studentship

at Christ Church, being considered at that time a “tolerable Latin poet”. He continued to cultivate Latin verse and commenced his BA on 26th June 1592 and his MA on 26th June 1595.

He was appointed by William James to the Mastership of Durham Grammar School in 1598. When James became Bishop of Durham (1606) he ordained Smart, made him his chaplain and gave him the Rectory of Boldon, Co. Durham, in 1609 and a prebend at Durham (sixth stall). Some time before 1610 Smart was made Master of St. Edmunds Hospital, Gateshead. On 6th July 1614 he was promoted to the fourth stall at Durham. In 1625 and again in 1627 he was placed on the High Commission for the Province of York and was a member of it when he was summoned for “a seditious invective sermon.”

He was present when James I communicated at Durham, on Easter Day, 20th April 1617, and noted that by royal order there was no chanting or organ playing. Two plain copes (long cloaks worn by priests) were worn, i.e. without images. Smart had absented himself from the monthly communions at Durham for many years for the reason that his old schoolfellow, Neile, Bishop of Durham since 1617, (later Archbishop of York) had brought in altars and images (such as embroidered copes) to the rituals. The enrichment of the cathedral and the service caused him to deliver a sermon on 27th July 1628, described as Miltonic in the strain of its invective, based on Psalm 31, verse 7, “I hate them that hold of superstitious vanities”. The sermon accused the Bishops not only of Popery but idolatry. It was reprinted in Edinburgh in the same year under the title “The vanitie and downfall of superstitious Popish Ceremonies.”

A quorum of the Commission for the Province of York met at two o’clock the same day and commenced proceedings against Smart. Smart thought that one Dr. John Cosin, one of the Chapter and later Bishop of Durham, who was especially mentioned in the sermon, was one of his judges. This was not true as Cosin only once interfered in the matter and that was to write a letter to the commissioners in Smart’s favour.

On the 2nd of September Smart was suspended and his prebend sequestered. On the 29th January 1629 the case was transmitted to the High Commission of the Southern Province, sitting at Lambeth and Smart was held in custody and his sermon was burned. Although he had influential friends, his bitter words before the commission did not help matters.

On his own petition, he was removed back to York in 1630. Eventually he was “deposed, degraded and fined £500” to the Crown. Refusing to pay the fine, he was imprisoned. He brought an action against his successor, Thomas Carre DD, on the basis that he, Smart, had not been deprived and if degraded could hold the prebend as a layman. The case failed and his friends raised £400 a year to support his family while he remained in prison, where he wrote:

“I appear’d before the Archbishop,
and all the high commission,
I gave him no grace,
But told him to his face,
That he favoured superstition,
Boldly I preach, hate a cross, hate a surplice,
Mitres, copes, and rochets:
Come hear me pray nine times a day,
And fill your heads with crochets”

On 3rd November 1640, having been nearly 12 years in prison, he petitioned the Long Parliament for his release. The commons resolved, on 22nd January 1641, that his sentence was illegal and void and directed the prosecution of Cosin. Twenty one articles of impeachment were laid against Cosin on Smart’s complaint, but Cosin put very satisfactory answers to the House and entirely vindicated

himself. Smart's council, a Mr. Glover, (there was a Mancetter martyr of this name?) told Smart openly at the bar of the House of Lords that he was ashamed of his conduct. Francis Rous styled Smart a "proto-martyr". Smart recovered his preferments. His letters show that he was stubborn in suing for arrears. He was described by Cosin as "an old man of most forward (meaning cantankerous), fierce and unpeacable spirit."

He signed "The Solemn League and Covenant", the declaration of loyalty to the Crown and equalisation of all the churches of the British Isles.

In 1645 he obtained the sequestered rectory of Bishopstoke in Hampshire and in 1646 the vicarage of Great Aycliffe in Co.Durham. He was known to have been living in London in 1648. He is believed to have died in Baxterwood, an outlying hamlet in the parish of St. Oswald, Durham, in 1648 or 1652 (reports are conflicting). He left a wife, Susannah, a son, William, and at least two daughters married to Ogle and Cookson.

He published a number of treatises and sermons, mostly attacking high church practices and customs, as well as his "Old Smart's Verses", a selection in English and Latin.

More information on his life is available from "Dictionary of National Biography", page 392, Brooks' "Lives of the Puritans" (1813), Neal's "History of the Puritans" (1822), Merridew's "Catalogue of Warwickshire Portraits" (1848), Colville's "Worthies of Warwickshire" (1870), G. W. Kitchen's, "Seven Sages of Durham" (1911), pages 99-132. This latter work contains an engraving of Smart by Wenceslaus Hollar, shown above. The best account of the row between Smart and Cosin is in Michael Tillbrook's "The Lost Principality", edited by David Morcambe (Nottingham 1987). Tillbrook's essay "Arminianism and Society in County Durham 1617-42" is on pages 202-226. The documentation is mainly in three Surtees Society volumes, vol.34 (1838), "The Acts of the High Commission Court within the Diocese of Durham" and vols. 52 and 55, "The Correspondence of John Cosin".

The altar, which originally contained the carved cherubs which caused the problem, can still be seen in Durham cathedral.