

## **James McCune Smith and Glasgow: A Scholar's Transatlantic Journey, 1821-1837**

For the Beniba Centre for Slavery Studies

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*And such art thou my bonnie Clyde  
Nor Roman steel nor Norman yell  
Nor Saxon craft nor England's pride  
Could fling around thee slavery's spell.  
Away, flow on thou beauteous stream  
May Freedom ever o'er thee beam!*

~ Written at Glasgow Aug. 1833. James M'Cune Smith.<sup>1</sup>

As the name of the University of Glasgow's new Learning Hub indicates, Dr James McCune Smith (1813-1865) has come to be regarded as one of the University's most illustrious alumni. It is also a welcome sign that the historical amnesia surrounding McCune Smith – arguably the nineteenth century's most significant African American intellectual – might be coming to an end.<sup>2</sup> Denied a college education in his native New York on account of race, the University's acceptance of McCune Smith's application gave him the opportunity became the first African American to earn a medical degree, which he did in 1837.<sup>3</sup> McCune Smith was eminently aware that racial prejudice and ill-gotten gains resulting from what he called 'slavery and caste' permeated every country to a greater or lesser degree; Britain was no exception. Nevertheless, he rejoiced that upon his arrival there, he found himself in a place that afforded him 'a greater amount of rational liberty than is secured to man in any other portion of the globe.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James McCune Smith, 'To the River Clyde (Scotland)', in *Amy Matilda Cassey's Friendship Album (Original & Selected Poetry &c.)*, 1833, <https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/Islandora:64815>.

<sup>2</sup> Stauffer's Introduction to James McCune Smith, *The Works of James McCune Smith: Black Intellectual and Abolitionist*, ed. John Stauffer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xiii, xvi; Amy M. Cools, 'The Life and Work of Dr. James McCune Smith (1813-1865)' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2021), Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas M. Morgan, 'The Education and Medical Practice of Dr. James McCune Smith (1813-1865), First Black American to Hold a Medical Degree', *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95, no. 7 (July 2003): 603-5.

<sup>4</sup> James McCune Smith, 'Extracts from Dr. Smith's Journal [9-11 September 1832]', *The Colored American*, 3 February 1838; James McCune Smith, 'Speech of James McCune Smith at the Anniversary Meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, 8 May 1838', in *Fifth Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society: With the Speeches Delivered at the Anniversary Meeting. 8th May 1838* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), 25-30; James McCune Smith, *A Lecture on the Haytien Revolutions; With a Sketch of the Character of*

As the son of a ‘self-emancipated,’ formerly enslaved woman from the deep South of the antebellum United States, it was by no means obvious that McCune Smith would come to enjoy the five years of unprecedented freedom and advanced education he experienced on the other side of the Atlantic.<sup>5</sup> Yet he did have several advantages that helped make it possible. For one, his mother Lavinia, his aunt Sally McCune, “Grandma Weaver,” and others in their supportive community made sure that McCune Smith received an excellent education from an early age.<sup>6</sup> A precocious and intelligent child, McCune Smith became a star student at the African Free School (AFS) in New York City, an institution which educated many nineteenth leading African American leaders.<sup>7</sup> He began attending the AFS around 1821.<sup>8</sup> The AFS’ teacher, Charles Andrews, was so impressed that he singled out eleven-year-old James to deliver a speech on behalf of the school to the visiting American Revolutionary War hero and abolitionist Lafayette.<sup>9</sup> McCune Smith continued to impress

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*Toussaint L’Ouverture. Delivered at the Stuyvesant Institute, (For the Benefit of the Colored Orphan Asylum,) February 26, 1841* (New York: Colored Orphan Asylum, 1841).

<sup>5</sup> James McCune Smith, ‘Introduction’, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, by Frederick Douglass (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), xxxi.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Hamilton, ‘Dr. James McCune Smith’, *The Anglo-African* 5, no. 13 (9 December 1865): 2; Philip A. Bell, ‘Death of Dr. Jas. McCune Smith’, *The Elevator*, 22 December 1865. McCune Smith’s lifelong family friend Philip Bell wrote that “Grandma Weaver” (double quotes in original) paid for McCune Smith’s ‘first tuition.’ Directories reveal that Aunt Sally McCune and “Grandma” Mary Weaver were both teachers. See Thomas Longworth, *Longworth’s American Almanac, New-York Register, and City Directory* (New York: Thomas Longworth, 1820), 406; William A. Mercein, *Mercein’s City Directory, New-York Register, and Almanac* (New York: William A. Mercein, 1820), 294, 429. Mary Weaver does not appear to be a family relation to either McCune Smith or Bell, which explains why Bell put “Grandma Weaver” in quotes. For an exploration of the relationships between Lavinia Smith, Sarah McCune, Mary Weaver, and McCune Smith, see Amy M. Cools, ‘Roots: Tracing the Family History of James McCune and Malvina Barnett Smith, 1783-1937, Part 1’, *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 37 (2020): 46–47.

<sup>7</sup> James McCune Smith, ‘Sketch of the Life and Labors of Rev. Henry Highland Garnet’, in *A Memorial Discourse; by Henry Highland Garnet, Delivered in the Hall of the House of Representatives, Washington City, D.C. on Sabbath, February 12, 1865* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1865), 21–23; David W. Blight, ‘In Search of Learning, Liberty, and Self Definition: James McCune Smith and the Ordeal of the Antebellum Black Intellectual’, *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 9, no. 2 (1985): 8; Patrick Rael, ‘The Long Death of Slavery’, in *Slavery in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York/London: New Press, 2005), 119.

<sup>8</sup> It is not known exactly what year McCune Smith first enrolled in the AFS. Bell recalled that it was 1819 or 1820; later scholars place a slightly later date. McCune Smith’s first recorded examination took place in 1822. See Charles C. Andrews, ‘A Dialogue: Spoken by Jas. M. Smith and William Hill at a Public Exam in 1822. Written for the Occasion by C.C.A Teacher’, in *Addresses and Pieces Spoken at Examinations, 1818-1826* (New-York African Free School Records, 1817-1832, New-York Historical Society), 45–50, <https://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15052coll5/id/28491>; Bell, ‘Death’; Morgan, ‘Education and Medical Practice’, 605.

<sup>9</sup> Charles C. Andrews and James McCune Smith, ‘An Address Delivered by James M. Smith, Aged 11 Years, in the New York African Free School, to General Lafayette, on the Day He Visited the Institution Sept 10th, 1824’,

Andrews and the AFS' trustees. For example, McCune Smith was chosen, along with a few other advanced students, for the 'Class of Merit' which included special classes in navigation and essay writing.<sup>10</sup> Andrews and the trustees also entrusted McCune Smith, at fourteen years old, with running the school while Andrews was absent for two months due to illness. The trustees who visited the AFS to ensure things were running smoothly praised McCune Smith's performance.<sup>11</sup>

After graduating from the AFS on 10 October 1827, fifteen-year-old McCune Smith continued his studies under the tutelage of mentors. Rev Peter Williams, Jr, pastor of St Philip's Episcopal Church, and Rev John Frederick Schroeder, author and a minister at Trinity Church, were chief among them. McCune Smith also apprenticed as a blacksmith for some of this time.<sup>12</sup> This demonstrates that McCune Smith and those most interested in his well-being were under no illusions pertaining to the practical necessity of having a marketable skill to fall back upon given legal and social impediments to African American advancement in nineteenth-century United States. Yet McCune Smith did not let this undermine his vision of a very different kind of life for himself. His studies during those years were particularly rigorous. Years later, McCune Smith reminisced about 'the wild dreams of my boyhood ambitions' which, despite his weariness from toiling at the anvil throughout the week, compelled him to dedicate nights and weekends to 'hard study... [in Latin or Greek] when Caesar, or Virgil, or Buttman... with their rugged and knotty hardships.'<sup>13</sup>

McCune Smith's mentors also envisioned a scholarly future for him. His lifelong friend Ransom F. Wake recalled that McCune Smith's early and enduring intellectual prowess 'induced some influential friends to make an effort to give him the advantages of an education suitable to his

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1824, Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/archive/78742-26.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Charles C. Andrews, *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools: From Their Establishment in 1787, to the Present Time* (New York: Mahlon Day, 1830), 61; McCune Smith, 'Sketch', 22.

<sup>11</sup> New-York African Free-School, *Reports of the Visiting Committee, 1820-1831*, vol. 2 (New York, NY, 1832), 101, 103-5; Carla L. Peterson, 'Black Life in Freedom: Creating an Elite Culture', in *Slavery in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York/London: New Press, 2005), 188.

<sup>12</sup> Hamilton, 'Dr. James McCune Smith'; Bell, 'Death'; Guido Furman, 'Obituary of James McCune Smith', *The Medical Register of the City of New York for the Year Commencing June 1, 1866*, 1866, 202.

<sup>13</sup> James McCune Smith, 'From Our New York Correspondent', *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 25 March 1859.

natural capabilities and acknowledged worth.<sup>14</sup> They made sure that he received the thorough humanities education, centred on the classics, which would qualify him for admission to any institution of higher education.<sup>15</sup> So when Williams' applications to New York colleges on behalf of McCune Smith failed, they did not give up: instead, they looked overseas.<sup>16</sup> Why Williams and McCune Smith settled on the University of Glasgow remains unclear. However, it was likely due to Williams' abolitionist contacts in Britain and the vibrant anti-slavery activism in Glasgow, including among the faculty and students at the University.<sup>17</sup>

Almost immediately upon his arrival in Britain in 1832, McCune Smith felt free in a way he had never experienced before. As his travel journal reveals, he felt that the country welcomed him with open arms. Doors were open to him everywhere he went, from the homes of anti-slavery activists to theatres, churches, and every other private and public forum to which he sought admittance. For the first time in his life, McCune Smith wrote, he had escaped the racial caste system that prevailed in his home country. This was no less true in Glasgow, he found, than it was in Liverpool, where he had first arrived and marvelled at his newfound sense of liberty.<sup>18</sup> This experience made a deep impression on McCune and informed his thinking on what it meant to be free and how to secure freedom for his fellow African Americans. No wonder that his friend Frederick Douglass wrote years later, while citing McCune Smith's own deep influence on him:

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<sup>14</sup> Ransom F. Wake et al., 'Reception of Dr. Smith, By the Colored Citizens of New York', *The Colored American*, 28 October 1837.

<sup>15</sup> Wake et al.; Bell, 'Death'; Furman, 'Obituary'; 'Colored Men as Physicians', *Nemaha County Republican*, 19 March 1885. For a detailed account of McCune Smith's education prior to the University of Glasgow, see Cools, 'Life and Work', Chapter One.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Williams, Jr., 'To the Citizens of New York [14 July 1834]', in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Bell, 'Death'.

<sup>17</sup> 'The University Anti-Slavery Petition', *Glasgow Chronicle*, 22 February 1833; 'William Smeal', in *The Annual Monitor for 1878 or, Obituary of the Members of the Society of Friends in Great Britain and Ireland, for the Year 1877* (London/York, 1877), 146–58; 'Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society - Glasgow, 16th Jan., 1833', *Glasgow Chronicle*, 18 January 1833; Stephen Mullen and Simon Newman, 'Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow: Report and Recommendations of the University of Glasgow History of Slavery Steering Committee' (University of Glasgow, September 2018), 5.

<sup>18</sup> McCune Smith, 'Journal [9-11 September 1832]'; James McCune Smith, 'Extract from Dr. Smith's Journal', *The Colored American*, 19 April 1838.

"[E]ducated in Scotland, and breathing the free air of that country, he came back to his native land with ideas of liberty which placed him in advance of most of his fellow citizens of African descent."<sup>19</sup>

McCune Smith first breathed the free air of Glasgow on 16 September, the day he arrived at the Broomielaw on the steamship *Ailsa Craig*.<sup>20</sup> He matriculated into the University of Glasgow within a few weeks of his arrival.<sup>21</sup> Alumnus-historian of the University David Murray wrote that 'The Library served as the Matriculation Office' and that 'Gown students (*togati*) alone were required to matriculate, and this was compulsory only upon those who intended to proceed to graduation.'<sup>22</sup> McCune Smith recorded another requirement: 'By the rules of the University at Glasgow, the students must attend in the College Chapel for divine worship on each Sabbath day.' The devout McCune Smith seems to have been a bit taken aback, however, that not all students there were as eager to attend church services as he was. As he recalled a few years later, 'Some [of the students] drank deep into infidelity, and these, viewing religious worship as the negro of the age, and a loathsome, contemptible thing, often found means - after answering to their names at roll call - to escape from the intolerable penance of religious services.'<sup>23</sup> Yet McCune Smith found plenty of kindred spirits at the University. For one, its students and staff alike had a long history of opposing slavery.<sup>24</sup> By the time McCune Smith left, he had amassed a 'numerous' circle of 'valued' friends at

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Hartford: Park Publishing, 1882), 568.

<sup>20</sup> James McCune Smith, 'Dr. Smith's Journal', *The Colored American*, 16 March 1839, 1; 'Liverpool Steam Packets', *Glasgow Herald*, 17 September 1832.

<sup>21</sup> W. Innis Addison, *The Matriculation Albums of the University of Glasgow, from 1728 to 1858* (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1913), 391. A University of Glasgow calendar for the following year states that student enrolment in the library began on 1 October; date for matriculation was 14 November. The dates were likely similar for 1832. See *Glasgow University Calendar, for the Session M.DCC.XXXIII-XXXIV* (University of Glasgow, 1834), opening page.

<sup>22</sup> David Murray, *Memories of the Old College of Glasgow* (Glasgow: Jackson, Wylie and Co, 1927), 273–74. This changed in 1843.

<sup>23</sup> James McCune Smith, 'Recent Anecdote', *The Colored American*, 2 March 1839.

<sup>24</sup> 'The University Anti-Slavery Petition'; Mullen and Newman, 'Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow', 3.

the University; never once, by his own account, did he experience mistreatment or exclusion because of his race there.<sup>25</sup>

McCune Smith would also have quickly begun signing up for classes. His first years at the University were, like his previous independent studies, heavily focused on the classics. As John Kerr writes in his history *Scottish Education*, the ‘Arts curriculum [at the time McCune Smith attended] was Latin, Greek, Logic, Moral Philosophy, [and] Mathematics and Natural Philosophy.’ He also writes that ‘Students in Arts were obliged to take classes in a certain order...from Latin to Greek, from Greek to Logic and so on, till they reached Natural Philosophy.’<sup>26</sup> Murray notes that while this was the usual progression, some students began with Greek.<sup>27</sup> We know that McCune Smith was enrolled in the Greek class during his first year because the record of it survives.<sup>28</sup> McCune Smith also won a first-year ‘General Eminence Prize’ in Latin – or as it was then called, ‘Humanity’ – for that year. The latter is curious given that he was not enrolled in the Latin class for that year or indeed for any year he was at the University.<sup>29</sup> When memorializing McCune Smith’s scholarly achievements, his lifelong friend Philip Bell recalled that McCune Smith ‘was so far advanced that he was admitted to the Sophomore class, an unusual occurrence in a European university.’<sup>30</sup> Together, these may indicate that McCune Smith was sufficiently advanced in Latin that he won the award by examination or submission of written exercises and so did not need to take the class. In any case, McCune Smith’s prize reveals that his early and rigorous studies in the classics paid off. They would

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<sup>25</sup> David Prentice and James McCune Smith, ‘Farewell Dinner to Dr. James M’Cune Smith, A.M. (From the Glasgow Chronicle of June 21st)’, *The Colored American*, 9 September 1837.

<sup>26</sup> John Kerr, *Scottish Education, School and University, from Early Times to 1908, with an Addendum 1908-1913* (Cambridge: University Press, 1913), 235–36.

<sup>27</sup> Murray, *Memories of the Old College of Glasgow*, 275.

<sup>28</sup> *Catalogus Togatorum in Academia Glasguensi 1832-33* (University of Glasgow, 1833), 13.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 18; *Prize Lists of the University of Glasgow from Session 1777-78 to Session 1832-33* (Glasgow: Carter & Pratt, 1902), 361–62; Murray, *Memories of the Old College of Glasgow*, 208.

<sup>30</sup> Bell, ‘Death’.

certainly have helped him qualify for the class taught by Sir Daniel Keyte Sandford, the renowned Greek scholar who McCune Smith later named among his instructors at the University of Glasgow.<sup>31</sup>

Besides throwing himself into University life, McCune Smith also quickly made friends among Glasgow's abolitionist community. McCune Smith later said of these friends: 'Sir, I bless the chance which threw me upon the sympathies of, and opened to me the association with the [Ralph] Wardlaws and the [Hugh] Heughes, the [William] Andersons and the [John] Murrays, men whose names are the property neither of the city or the time in which they dwell, but will be held in grateful remembrance so long as civil and religious liberty shall be remembered. The privileges which I enjoyed in their society are greater than any value at which I can estimate them.'<sup>32</sup> Among those who made a particularly deep and lasting impression on McCune Smith was John Murray. Murray had become an ardent abolitionist after witnessing the brutalities of slavery while working for a time in St. Kitts as a young man.<sup>33</sup> They became fast friends quickly: by March 1833, they had become close enough that Murray put aside his usual religiously-instilled distaste for theatre to join McCune Smith at a performance of his old AFS schoolmate and friend, the pioneering African American actor Ira Aldridge.<sup>34</sup> About two decades later, McCune Smith felt compelled to write a heartfelt biographical portrait of Murray after hearing of his recent death. As he wrote, 'I would do violence to truth and humanity whose servant and soldier he was, should I neglect to pen a few recollections of that most earnest and efficient man.' McCune Smith modestly characterized his account of Murray as merely 'fling[ing a] pebble upon his cairn,' yet doing so 'with moistened

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<sup>31</sup> James McCune Smith, 'Remarks of James McCune Smith at a Welcome Reception in His Honor, 26 September 1837', *The Colored American*, 28 October 1837.

<sup>32</sup> McCune Smith.

<sup>33</sup> James McCune Smith, 'John Murray (Of Glasgow)', in *Autographs for Freedom*, vol. 1 (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853), 62–63, 67.

<sup>34</sup> 'Theatre-Royal, Dunlop-Street', *Glasgow Argus*, 18 March 1833; James McCune Smith, 'Ira Aldridge', *The Anglo-African Magazine*, January 1860, 29–30; Berndt Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Early Years, 1807-1833*, Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 181, 243.

cheek.' A few years later, McCune Smith paid him an even more heartfelt tribute when he named one of his sons John Murray.<sup>35</sup>

While the historical record has not revealed exactly how McCune Smith and Murray met, it was Murray's hand that helped create the record of one of their most important collaborations. McCune Smith joined Murray and other prominent Glasgow abolitionists in forming the Glasgow Emancipation Society (GES) on 12 December 1833. Murray and Quaker abolitionist William Smeal served as the GES's secretaries.<sup>36</sup> McCune Smith spoke at length at this meeting, likely invited to do so since he was the only one present who had personally experienced the evils of slavery. While the text of his speech has not been preserved, it was summarized and reported on in anti-slavery Glasgow newspapers. McCune Smith told the 'vast assemblage' gathered there that he had not arrived in Glasgow – as many others had done – 'to solicit aid in behalf of the slaves, or the free blacks, of the United States, but that, driven by a cruel prejudice – a prejudice which refused to admit me into American Colleges, simply because I belonged not to the aristocracy of the skin, I was compelled to seek that education abroad, with which my own country is teeming.' He rejoiced to find himself among lovers of freedom determined to 'to rouse this class [of people opposed to slavery but 'inactive' in efforts to end it] from their lethargy.'<sup>37</sup> As McCune Smith recalled soon after his return to the United States, however unjust the circumstances that had driven him from his home country, he was grateful for the opportunity to 'battle side by side with [the GES] in the cause of the immediate and universal emancipation of slaves.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> McCune Smith, 'John Murray', 62, 67; 1860 United States Census, New York, New York County, New York, Digital Image s.v. "Jas. M. Smith." *FamilySearch.org*; Amy M. Cools, 'Roots: Tracing the Family History of James McCune and Malvina Barnett Smith, 1783-1937, Part 3', *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 37 (2020): 63, 68–69. McCune Smith's memorial appears to be the only extant biographical work dedicated to Murray.

<sup>36</sup> 'Minute Book of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, No. 1' (Glasgow, Scotland, 1833), 5–8.

<sup>37</sup> 'Universal Extinction of Slavery', *Glasgow Chronicle*, 13 December 1833; 'Universal Extinction of Slavery', *Glasgow Argus*, 16 December 1833; 'Universal Extinction of Slavery, Glasgow, 12th December, 1833', *Glasgow Argus*, 16 December 1833.

<sup>38</sup> Wake et al., 'Reception of Dr. Smith'.

The GES tends to be portrayed by scholars as the first significant organization formed by and for Glasgow abolitionists.<sup>39</sup> However, they were already an organized and very active cohort for whom the GES was not a new endeavour: rather, it was a new phase of a well-established one. Smeal, Murray, James Johnstone, Anthony Wigham, and many other founders of the GES were founders and members of the Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1822. The latter's final meeting appears to have taken place on 6 December 1833, during which they conceived the plan to form a new society dedicated to ending slavery in the United States as well as in the British colonies. Rather than being an entirely new organization, the formation of the GES was a sort of second founding that marked a new and expanded plan of action for the Glasgow abolitionists.<sup>40</sup> No wonder, then, that McCune Smith wrote his paean to the Clyde as a potent symbol of Scotland's freedom fighters many months before the GES was founded.

Though he remained as closely involved as he could with the GES throughout his time in Glasgow and beyond, McCune Smith could not attend every meeting. His studies kept him extremely busy. Also, transportation to and from the University was not always easy; as Murray recalled, 'there were no tramcars [and] practically no omnibuses' until at least the mid-century. Students tended to walk wherever they needed to go and the distances were often far. Walking was, however, a favoured pastime for students, especially since there were few organized sports at the University at that time. Another favourite pastime was rowing on the River Clyde in summer.<sup>41</sup> As his travel journal reveals, McCune Smith was an avid walker who enjoyed exploring.<sup>42</sup> It is possible he took up rowing along with the other students as well. Given that he wrote his poem to the Clyde in August, it

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<sup>39</sup> For example, see Duncan C. Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists, 1833-1861* (Baton Rouge/London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> 'William Smeal', 150; 'Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society'; 'Mr. Thompson's Lecture on St. Domingo', *Glasgow Argus*, 9 December 1833; 'Minute Book of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, No. 1', 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Murray, *Memories of the Old College of Glasgow*, 423, 446-47.

<sup>42</sup> James McCune Smith, 'Dr. Smith's Journal [12 September 1832]', *The Colored American*, 30 June 1838; James McCune Smith, 'Dr. Smith's Journal [12 September Part 2 - 13 September 1832]', *The Colored American*, 21 July 1838; McCune Smith, 'Journal [Liverpool, 13-15 September 1832]'.

is easy to imagine McCune Smith, a characteristically reflective mood, drifting on its ‘silvery waves’ on a balmy day as its stanzas took shape in his mind.<sup>43</sup>

For the next two years, McCune Smith continued to work towards his bachelor’s degree.

During his second year, he studied – among other subjects – anatomy, botany, and logic; he won a prize for the latter.<sup>44</sup> As Thomas Morgan writes, McCune Smith – as part of the anatomy class taught by the renowned Dr James Jeffray – some of his studies would have been conducted among the geological and biological specimens in the University’s Hunterian Museum.<sup>45</sup> The historical record is largely silent about what McCune Smith studied his third year. He may have taken the Ethics class during the 1834-1835 session: a student with his first and last name is listed in the class register for that year.<sup>46</sup> However, since two other students with the same first and last name also attended the University at the same time, it is not always easy to tell them apart in the records.<sup>47</sup> McCune Smith may have also pursued studies in other languages. His biographical profile on the University website states that he ‘was fluent in Latin, Greek and French and with a working knowledge of Hebrew, Italian, Spanish and German.’<sup>48</sup> While the profile provides no sources for this and McCune Smith himself did not – so far as extant sources reveal – use any language other than English, Greek, and Latin in his writings, there are indications he could read other languages. For example, citations and quotes in McCune Smith’s writings indicate that he regularly read works in French.<sup>49</sup> If McCune

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<sup>43</sup> McCune Smith, ‘River Clyde’.

<sup>44</sup> *University Register: Professor Jeffray’s Students 1811-12 to 1847-48* (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1848), 150; *Catalogus Togatorum in Academia Glasguensi 1833-34* (University of Glasgow, 1834), 10; *University Prizes* (University of Glasgow, 1834), 9.

<sup>45</sup> Morgan, ‘Education and Medical Practice’, 608.

<sup>46</sup> *Catalogus Togatorum in Academia Glasguensi 1834-35* (University of Glasgow, 1835), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Sometimes the three James Smiths are distinguished from one another by a signifier to differentiate them, such as (in McCune Smiths’ case) the middle initial M. or ‘maj.’ or ‘min.’ (elder or younger). However, this is not always the case. McCune Smith was simply listed under his first and last names – with no other signifier – in the Logic class for the 1833-1834 session. We know this was McCune Smith because he won the Logic prize for that year. See *Catalogus Togatorum 1832-33*, 13; *Catalogus Togatorum 1833-34*; *University Prizes*, 3, 47.

<sup>48</sup> ‘University of Glasgow :: Story :: Biography of James McCune Smith’, accessed 22 January 2021, <https://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk/biography/?id=WH24115&type=P>.

<sup>49</sup> For example, see McCune Smith, *Lecture on the Haytien Revolutions*, 4, 6; James McCune Smith, ‘From Our New York Correspondent’, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 15 December 1854; James McCune Smith, ‘From Our New York Correspondent’, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 12 January 1855; James McCune Smith, ‘Chess’, *The Anglo-African Magazine*, September 1859, 278.

Smith did take any of the newly available classes in languages other than ancient Greek and Latin at the University, he was taking part in a burgeoning movement to expand language studies beyond the classics.<sup>50</sup> It is also possible that McCune Smith began to study statistics in this period. Though there is no direct evidence of when he first came to be interested in this emerging field, McCune Smith showed himself to already be adept at this method of analysis by the spring of 1837, as we shall see.<sup>51</sup> Whatever his studies were during this period, he completed them successfully. McCune Smith was awarded his Bachelor of Arts degree on 29 April 1835.<sup>52</sup>

McCune Smith first enrolled in the University of Glasgow's medical school in 1835, the same year he began to pursue his master's degree.<sup>53</sup> It is only at this point that we can be certain that McCune Smith determined to set forth on what would be a pioneering career as a physician. According to his friend Philip Bell, McCune Smith had arrived at the University planning a career as a clergyman. Bell, however, thought McCune Smith better suited for other things: he was, Bell wrote, a 'close analytical reasoner' with a mind that was 'too practical' to make him a talented public speaker. As Bell wrote, McCune Smith's mentor Peter Williams 'wished him to study for the ministry' and sent him to Glasgow to do so. In his letters to McCune Smith, Bell recalled, he worked to persuade McCune Smith to do otherwise. Bell suggested it was largely due to him that McCune Smith switched careers and he was glad of it: 'If we had that influence with him, we have the consolation of knowing we spoiled what would have made a poor preacher and turned it into an excellent physician.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> 'Hebrew Language', *Glasgow Herald*, 29 October 1832, Mitchell Library, Glasgow; 'Hebrew. Glasgow College, 7th Nov., 1832', *Glasgow Herald*, 9 November 1832, Mitchell Library, Glasgow; 'French Language', *Glasgow Argus*, 16 December 1833, Mitchell Library, Glasgow; 'University of Glasgow', *Glasgow Argus*, 26 December 1833, Mitchell Library, Glasgow; 'What Are the Universities?', *Glasgow Argus*, 14 August 1834, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

<sup>51</sup> Statistical analysis came to be among McCune Smith's favoured methods of combatting racist theories and harmful or ineffective medical practices. For an exploration of McCune Smith's expertise in and uses of statistics, see Cools, 'Life and Work', Chapter Six.

<sup>52</sup> *Nomina Magistrorum Artium Universitatis Glasguensis AB Anno 1763-1888* (University of Glasgow, 1888), 181.

<sup>53</sup> *University Register: Medicine 1822-23 to 1842-43* (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1843), 84.

<sup>54</sup> Bell, 'Death'. See also Cools, 'Life and Work', Chapter Three.

McCune Smith's fourth-year arts and humanities studies overlapped with his medical studies throughout the 1835-1836 session. A surviving class register lists McCune Smith in the physics class that year.<sup>55</sup> Another source reveals that he certainly studied Moral Philosophy that year as well. University of Glasgow librarian Robert MacLean and Matthew Daniel Eddy recently discovered a receipt book which lists the reading materials that McCune Smith checked out while enrolled in that class. They also discovered a register of works he checked out from the Medical Library. They include medical and pharmacology textbooks and issues of medical journals. Between the two, McCune Smith's reading list – at least that which we can reconstruct from these sources – indicates that this was the year he also satisfied the Mathematics and Natural Philosophy master's degree requirements. They also reveal an interesting little detail about McCune Smith's personal life: he lived at Mary Millar's boarding house at 55 Renfrew St, about a twenty-five-minute walk from the University.<sup>56</sup> Again, McCune Smith successfully completed his course of study and was awarded his Master of Arts degree on 6 April 1836.<sup>57</sup>

On 14 November 1836, McCune Smith matriculated into the University's medical school. In doing so, he pledged to 'attend the Lectures of the of the several Professions annexed to [their] respective names for three months at least from this date.'<sup>58</sup> These lectures were in – according to a report comparing the curricula of the Edinburgh and Glasgow university medical schools – '1. Anatomy. 2. Chemistry. 3. Institutes of Medicine. 4. Surgery. 5. Practice of Medicine. 6. Materia Medica. 7. Midwifery. [and] 8. Botany.' Another degree requirement was 'Attendance at an

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<sup>55</sup> *Catalogus Togatorum in Academia Glasguensi 1835-36* (Glasgow, 1836), 816.

<sup>56</sup> Pigot and Co.'s *National Commercial Directory of the Whole of Scotland, and of the Isle of Man...* (London: J. Pigot & Co., 1837), 564; *Students Receipt Book, 1833-45* (University of Glasgow, 1845), 629; *Register of Loans, College Medical Library, University of Glasgow, November 1827 to November 1842* (University of Glasgow, 1842), 283; Matthew Daniel Eddy, 'James McCune Smith: New Discovery Reveals How First African American Doctor Fought for Women's Rights in Glasgow', *The Conversation*, 8 October 2021, <https://theconversation.com/james-mccune-smith-new-discovery-reveals-how-first-african-american-doctor-fought-for-womens-rights-in-glasgow-166233>. My thanks to Robert MacLean for sharing his research on the details and correct address of McCune Smith's at 55 Renfrew St, since the receipt book entry contains an error.

<sup>57</sup> *Nomina Magistrorum*, 38.

<sup>58</sup> *Register of Attested Students of Medicine, 1766-1843* (Glasgow, 1843), 138, 144, 146.

Infirmary for 12 Months.<sup>59</sup> We know for certainty who two of McCune Smith's instructors in these subjects were since he later named them.<sup>60</sup> One was Thomas Thomson, then the University's Professor of Chemistry. Murray recalled that Thomson was particularly popular with the students.<sup>61</sup> The other was William Cumin (variously spelled Cummin), Professor of Midwifery and presiding surgeon for the Glasgow Royal Infirmary and the Lock Hospital.<sup>62</sup> McCune Smith excelled in his medical studies, as evidenced by Cumin's appointing him to a clerkship at the Lock Hospital. This was one of two 'reserved for the most distinguished and best informed of the Students of [Cumin's] Class.'<sup>63</sup> It was this internship at the Lock Hospital that led to McCune Smith's emergence as an advocate for marginalized patients and the first publications of his works – indeed, of any African American physician's – in a medical journal only weeks after becoming the first African American physician to receive a medical degree (27 April 1837).<sup>64</sup> On 17 May 1837, only a few weeks after receiving his medical degree, McCune Smith first wrote to *The London Medical Gazette* in response to an attack on his work from a senior colleague, Dr Alexander Hannay. Hannay was a professor at the rival Andersonian Medical School and member of the Glasgow Medical Society who occasionally attended as physician to the Lock Hospital.<sup>65</sup> In this and a follow-up letter, McCune Smith defended his findings which he had presented to the Glasgow Medical Society earlier that year and appended the original paper. Both through personal observations and close analysis of statistics gathered while

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<sup>59</sup> James Spittal, 'Chair of Pathology (Memorial of the Town Council of Edinburgh)', *The Caledonian Mercury*, 28 August 1837.

<sup>60</sup> Wake et al., 'Reception of Dr. Smith'.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander Duncan, *Memorials of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, 1599-1850* (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1896), 279; Murray, *Memories of the Old College of Glasgow*, 254–56.

<sup>62</sup> Duncan, *Memorials of the Faculty*, 275.

<sup>63</sup> John Barras Hay, *Inaugural Addresses by Lords Rectors of the University of Glasgow: To Which Are Prefixed an Historical Sketch and Account of the Present State of the University* (Glasgow: David Robertson, 1839), lxi.

<sup>64</sup> *Nomina Medicinae Doctorum Universitatis Glasguensis AB Anno 1769-1888* (University of Glasgow, 1888), 68–69.

<sup>65</sup> Alexander John Hannay, 'On the Application of Solid Nitrás Argenti in the Gonorrhœa of Women', in *The London Medical Gazette*, vol. 20 (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1837), 185–91; Duncan, *Memorials of the Faculty*, 281.

interning at Lock, McCune Smith found that Hannay's silver nitrate treatment for gonorrhoea was both ineffective and often accompanied by painful side effects, some of them severe.<sup>66</sup>

After having experienced five years of personal freedom and academic success, McCune Smith experienced his first taste of what he had to face again upon returning to his home country. Sometime in early May 1837, McCune Smith attempted to book a first-class cabin to the United States on the American brig *Canonicus*. His great friend John Murray recorded the experience in detail soon after it occurred, complete with a detailed reconstruction of the conversation.<sup>67</sup> Its Captain Bigley (no first name provided or yet found) offered McCune Smith a second-class cabin instead. When McCune Smith insisted on booking first-class, Bigley refused. When a companion of Bigley's added that McCune Smith's presence in the first class cabin would drive away passengers, McCune Smith noted that there were no American passengers and attested to his own experience: 'No British subject would refuse to go in the same cabin with me on account of my complexion, since I have repeatedly traveled in the best cabins of the first steamers in Britain, without meeting with any such objection.' But Bigley still refused: 'Although all my passengers were perfectly willing, yet I would not suffer you to go in my cabin, for I have not been accustomed to live with colored people.' In the open letter to Bigley which contains this account, Murray charged him with a 'public offense' and offered this warning: 'you and... your countrymen may be made aware that they may expect to be remonstrated with and publicly exposed, if they attempt to import such anti-christian maxims and practices into this country.'<sup>68</sup> Bigley's treatment of McCune Smith roused a storm of sympathy and outrage from the Glasgow abolitionist community and his fellow students at the University of

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<sup>66</sup> James McCune Smith, 'Solid Nitrate of Silver in Gonorrhœa – To the Editor of the Medical Gazette', in *The London Medical Gazette*, vol. 20 (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1837), 310; James McCune Smith, 'Solid Nitrate of Silver in Gonorrhœa – To the Editor of the Medical Gazette (Part 2)', in *The London Medical Gazette*, vol. 20 (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1837), 894–95. For a fuller discussion of McCune Smith's letters to the *Gazette*, the context in which they were written, and many more details of McCune Smith's medical training than could be covered here, see Cools, 'Life and Work', Chapter Three. See also Eddy, 'James McCune Smith: New Discovery Reveals How First African American Doctor Fought for Women's Rights in Glasgow'.

<sup>67</sup> Murray did not specify whether he was present or that McCune Smith recounted the conversation later.

<sup>68</sup> John Murray, 'Contraband Importation! The American Anti-Christian Prejudice against Coloured Persons Imported into Scotland!!', *Glasgow Argus*, 15 May 1837.

Glasgow as well.<sup>69</sup> McCune Smith himself described Bigley's bigotry as not only an insult to his dignity; it was 'an insult on this great country, no native of which would deny the social board to any man on account of the color of his skin.'<sup>70</sup>

It took months for McCune Smith to return to New York City. Refusing to accept anything less than a first-class berth, McCune Smith remained until he could 'avail himself of a transient British vessel to return to his native land.'<sup>71</sup> At a welcome reception held about two weeks after his return, McCune Smith declared that he was glad to be back home. But he told his enraptured audience of his experiences living in a country where he freely enjoyed 'the society and the sympathy of... noble-minded men, amongst whom I went a young and friendless exile, by whom I was received and treated as a brother and an equal' and where 'the gates of learning were open to all on the same terms, and with equal privileges.'<sup>72</sup> McCune Smith's most valuable education was not that which he received within the University of Glasgow's venerable walls: it was the experience of personal freedom, free from the imposition of an 'aristocracy of the skin,' free from unreasoned hate and prejudice. This was a lesson McCune Smith never forgot; he spent the rest of his life imparting it to others.

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<sup>69</sup> John Murray and William Smeal, 'American Slavery and Its Effects - The Ship *Canonicus*, Captain Bigley', in *Britain and America United in the Cause of Universal Freedom: Being the Third Annual Report of the Glasgow Emancipation Society* (Glasgow: Glasgow Emancipation Society, 1837), 123–24; Prentice and McCune Smith, 'Farewell Dinner'.

<sup>70</sup> Prentice and McCune Smith, 'Farewell Dinner'.

<sup>71</sup> 'American Anti-Slavery Society', *The Evening Post*, 10 May 1838.

<sup>72</sup> Wake et al., 'Reception of Dr. Smith'.