

Register

Obituaries

Gene Smith

Leading expert on Tibetan history and literature, much of which was destroyed in the Chinese takeover

Gene Smith was the leading authority in the West on Tibetan literature and history. He had unparalleled knowledge of that field and devoted his life to making it available to others, doing more than any single person to preserve for posterity the enormous heritage of Tibetan literature after much of it had been looted and destroyed after China's takeover of Tibet in the 1950s.

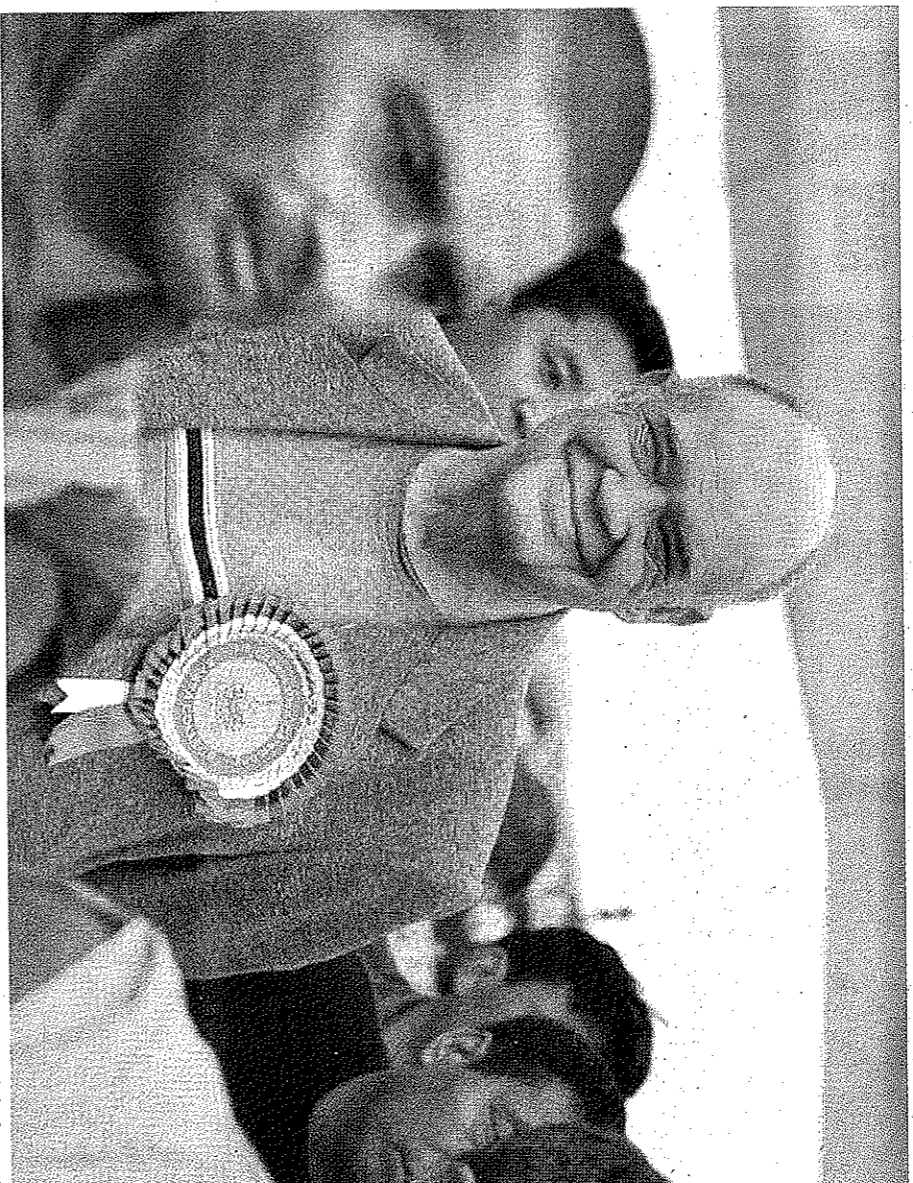
Ellis Gene Smith had an unusual background for one of the world's leading scholars of Buddhism: he was born in 1936, in Ogden, Utah, to a traditional Mormon family that traced its roots from the brother of Joseph Smith, the founder of the faith. His father was a scientist working in a federal guided missile programme, and, after high school, Smith received a congressional appointment to the military academy at West Point. He never took it up, studying instead at a small college in Utah and later at the University of Washington in Seattle. It was there that he came across the almost unexplored world of Tibetan literature.

His guide to this vast and arcane field was the great Tibetan scholar Dezhung Rinpoche. Kunga Tempai Nyima, Dezhung Rinpoche was a leading intellectual in the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism and one of the greatest of traditional Tibetan masters to have escaped from Tibet to India after China took over direct rule of Tibet in 1959 and began the purging and demolition of its traditional culture and society. Dezhung Rinpoche had been brought in to teach at the University of Washington in the early 1960s and under his guidance Smith quickly became fluent in both colloquial and classical Tibetan, and absorbed much of Dezhung Rinpoche's encyclopaedic knowledge of and enthusiasm for Tibetan intellectual history.

Smith began his studies for a PhD and did advanced studies in Sanskrit and Pali at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. But the course of his life was set when he received a grant in 1965 from the Ford Foundation to carry out doctoral research in India. He never completed that PhD but instead became the cornerstone of the entire field of Tibetan studies.

Smith found in India hundreds of Tibetan refugee scholars who had fled Tibet six years earlier, often carrying no other possessions than their precious books on their backs, many of which would turn out to be the only surviving copies of priceless works. Smith quickly mobilised the resources, personal connections with Tibetan teachers and institutional structures to publish, preserve and catalogue these works.

He took a job in the Delhi field office of the Library of Congress and in due course discovered a way in which a system could be developed for funding the copying and distribution of these priceless documents. The Library of Congress had a programme, known as PL480, whereby India paid back loans for development assistance given by the United States in the form of books, which were then distributed to participating libraries in the US. Smith persuaded the library and US officials to accept thousands of rare and important Tibetan manuscripts as proper-



Smith: he created a database of almost all known Tibetan authors and teachers, with links to digital copies of their work

purchases for the programme, and arranged to have them edited, copied, published and distributed.

To do this required enormous cultural and academic knowledge, not only to recognise, catalogue and process the manuscripts, but to find and build trust with the hundreds of Tibetan scholars, monks and lamas scattered in refugee camps across India, Bhutan and Nepal. But his ability was no less evident in his understanding of the literature they were attempting to preserve.

To his enormous depth of cultural understanding and respect he added great organisational skills, which

He discovered many of the sole surviving copies of priceless works

enabled him to arrange for multiple sets of the texts he recovered to be published and reproduced. Each of these was dispatched to the US universities where Tibetan was studied, allowing each of them to acquire major collections of Tibetan literature.

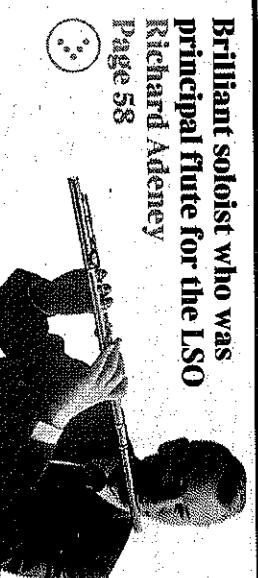
Smith's own knowledge of the literature he was distributing became evident in the introductions he wrote to these volumes: They became famous among scholars for providing the modern world with what was more or less its first systematic glimpse of Tibetan history and literature in detail. These introductions became widely available only in 2001 when they were republished in the collected volume *Among Tibetan Texts*, but years earlier had already sealed his reputation as the most knowledgeable of all non-Tibet-

an scholars in the field. As well as facilitating the emergence of Tibetan studies in the West, Smith served as director of the Library of Congress Indian field office from 1980 to 1985, when he moved to Jakarta to run the library's South-East Asian programmes until 1994. He spent a further three years working as director of the library's Middle Eastern office in Cairo until 1997 when he took early retirement and returned to the US to focus on Tibetan studies. This included periods as a consultant to the Trace Foundation in New York and as acquisitions editor for Wisdom Publications in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he launched a new series to make available outstanding contributions to scholarship on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism not widely known outside a narrow specialist audience.

Smith had a vast personal collection of Tibetan manuscripts and books, and in his retirement established a project to make as much of it as possible available to present and future generations. The project, named the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Centre (TBRC), was established in 1999, and three years later was given support by the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation that allowed it to move to New York. With a small team at the West 17th Street offices of the Rubin Foundation, Smith created a website with a database of almost all known Tibetan authors and teachers in history, as well as links to digital copies of their works.

He was able in his final years to disseminate hard drives containing hundreds of volumes of Tibetan literature to university libraries around the world, as well as to countless Buddhist

Brilliant soloist who was
Principal Flute for the LSO
Richard Adeney
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Lives remembered

Nat Lofthouse

Ted Gilbertson writes: Your recent obituary of Nat Lofthouse (Jan 17) brought back many happy memories of my days as an avid autograph hunter of footballers of the 1950s. Bill Ridding, manager of Bolton Wanderers and a former Trannemere Rovers player and manager, brought his first division team to Trannemere to play in a testimonial match for Harold Bell, who established a record of playing in 401 consecutive matches. It was an early evening match in the summer, giving four young boys from Liverpool ample time to make the journey across the river by ferry and a couple of buses. After the game we managed to board the coach returning the Bolton players home as we obtained our precious autographs. Without warning the coach engine started as the driver was unaware of our presence. After some urgent calls to the driver to stop and our hastily made plea that, as the coach had to go to Liverpool, "why not give us a lift?", it was agreed that we should be dropped off after the coach emerged from the Mersey Tunnel. For the ten minutes that journey took I sat next to Nat as he signed the numerous photographs I had of him in my football annuals while he chatted to me just as a favourite uncle would do. The Bolton team that beat Manchester United in the 1958 Cup Final cost £110 — the combined price of the £10 signing-on fee then for each player. Football has certainly changed. So have footballers.

The Rev Prebendary

Gerard Irvine

Wendy Cummins writes: During his years as priest-in-charge at Cranford in the late Fifties and early Sixties, Gerard Irvine (obituary, Jan 15) made the lives of our youth rich and unforgettable. The Holy Angels Youth Club met on Sunday evenings after Eversong but Gerard kindly instituted a Mass at 11.40am (over by 12) to accommodate the young. He willingly gave talks to the club and helped us to obtain speakers. We still marvel that he could have persuaded friends such as Osbert Lancaster, Rose Macaulay and John Betjeman to talk to us in a dingy church hall on a Sunday evening. The Nissen hut hall was the scene of plays, Gerard being heavily involved in their choosing. Notable were *The Prototype* and *Murder in the Cathedral* performed by the youth club and produced by Gerard's friend Father Patrick McLaughlin, Rector of Soho and a great inspiration to us. We were very fortunate to know and be influenced by Gerard.

Dick King-Smith

Gwyneth Willis writes: A fact omitted from Dick King-Smith's obituary (Jan 6) was his ability as a wart charmer. In the 1970s our four young children's hands were covered in warts in spite of their GP father's attempts at treatment. Dick offered to help. We cannot remember what he said or did but the warts were charmed away.

If you would like to add a personal view or recollection to a published obituary, you can send your contribution by post to Times Obituaries, 3 Thomas More Square, London E9 8JT, or by e-mail to tributes@thetimes.co.uk