A “Simple Metallurgist” at MIT

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From beginning to end I have been a simple metallurgist using metals and their structure as a kind of inverted touchstone to assay all things.

— Cyril Stanley Smith, A Search for Structure

Cyril Smith came to MIT in 1961 with joint appointments as Institute Professor, Professor of History of Science and Technology, and Professor of Metallurgy after serving the University of Chicago as Professor of Metallurgy for fifteen years. He relocated at age 57, at a time when the Institute’s mandatory retirement age was 65. Correspondence from the archives of MIT’s Department of Materials Science and Engineering, formerly the Department of Metallurgy, from the mid-1950s through 1961 provides a good perspective on Professor Smith’s prior connections with MIT’s Department of Metallurgy, MIT’s efforts to recruit him, his aspirations for the final years leading up to formal retirement, and his personal perspective on the import of his MIT work.

John Chipman, Chairman of MIT’s Department of Metallurgy from 1946–62, was a frequent correspondent with Cyril Smith and well aware of his broad interests. Smith wrote to Chipman,

As you know, I have had more or less as a hobby an interest in the history of metallurgy. I find myself becoming more and more interested in this field and am thinking of possibly requesting a year’s leave of absence from the University to indulge exclusively in this field, or possibly combining six months of such activity with six months’ professional metallurgical activity in England. (14 October 1954)

Chipman replied, “I am very interested to learn of your proposal to work on the history of metallurgy. This should be a very interesting task, and your results will be of very great value to the metallurgical profession. I shall be only too glad to do anything

Keywords
MIT, history of metallurgy.
On his move from Chicago to Boston:

I thought it was time for a change in emphasis and aim. Leo Szilard has put it well in his Ten commandments: “Do your work for six years; but in the seventh, go into solitude or among strangers so that the recollection of your friends does not hinder you from being what you have become.”

C S Smith

I can to help you with this plan” (18 October 1954). Smith and Chipman corresponded in subsequent years about the history of metallurgy but there is no record of Chipman’s direct role in obtaining an MIT faculty appointment for Smith. Nevertheless, given a professional relationship that dated back to the Manhattan Project, plus Chipman’s obvious appreciation of Smith’s interest and expertise in the history of metallurgy, it is highly likely that Chipman was instrumental in the offer made to Smith in July 1960 by MIT President J A Stratton (Merton C Flemings, personal communication to Heather Lechtman, March 2006).

Smith’s offer letter states, “It gives me great pleasure to extend to you an invitation to accept appointment at MIT as an Institute Professor with tenure... effective on a date to meet your convenience.” Stratton continued, “An Institute Professor is free to roam about as he desires, but for administrative purposes I suggest that your base be in the School of Humanities and Social Science. John Chipman’s support has been most cordial, and he will be delighted to have you spend as much time with the Metallurgy Department as you see fit” (8 July 1960).

Smith was clearly attached to his position at the University of Chicago, as he replied,

I am highly honored by the offer and am strongly tempted but I wish to delay the decision a little longer. Chicago has absorbed a fair fraction of my mind and heart for several years, and I am keenly conscious of the special qualities of this University. My decision will be made almost entirely on the basis of which place seems most likely to provide a stimulating and sympathetic atmosphere for the research and writing that I intend to do in the last decade or so of my professional life.

He goes on to state his aspirations for the position:

I would expect to participate in the development of a program of teaching the history of technology and science at MIT, though I am not by nature an educator and I could not usefully contribute to elementary or broad survey courses. I would welcome the opportunity to participate in metallurgy seminars, and would enjoy contact with graduate stu-