

Thomas William Allen 1862–1950

It may be as well to begin this notice by saying that the writer of it faces peculiar difficulties. Forty years have elapsed since the death of the subject. Few people now remain who knew him, and their acquaintance with him was in the last years of his very long life. In this respect the obituarist finds himself reduced to the condition of the ordinary biographer. But in the present case there is another and much greater embarrassment, the nature of which will become clear in what is said below about the manuscripts of Homer. The result is that this memoir must give the impression of being written with less loyalty and enthusiasm than is usual in the genre. It has been written however at the request of the Academy in pursuit of its aim of providing a public record of the achievements of each of its Fellows.

Thomas William Allen spent the whole of his career at The Queen's College, Oxford, of which he was elected a Fellow in 1890. About his early years we are not at all well informed. He was born in 1862, the eldest of five children of Thomas Bull Allen and Amelia Le Lacheur. While two of his sisters were sent to North London Collegiate School in the days of the great Miss Buss, he was educated privately. The parents evidently believed in education; little else is known about them, except that both came from families engaged in trade and his mother's family was probably the more prosperous of the two. Allen spent a year at University College, London, an institution described by one of his teachers there, A. Church, the professor of Latin, in unflattering terms: 'There is but little in the circumstances or the tone of this college to encourage the disinterested study of the classics.'

But Allen seems to have emerged unscathed from the experience. In 1881 he was elected to a scholarship at Queen's, coming up in that year to read Mods and Greats. He took a first class in each, graduating in 1885, and in the same year received what now seems the extravagant honour of



But Allen seems to have learned much from the experience. In 1885, coming up in that year to read B.A. and Great. He took a first class in each, graduating in 1885, and in the same year received what now seems the extravagant honour of

T. W. ALLEN *M.J. Lancaster/Hope-Nicholson Archive*

being made a Fellow of University College London. Immediately after graduating he found himself asked to stand in as temporary professor of Humanity in the University of Edinburgh for the session of 1885–6. Again it seems surprising that such a young man should be invited to perform these duties, even if the level required in many of the classes in a Scottish university of that period was modest. On returning to Oxford he undertook various minor teaching duties for a number of colleges, until in November of 1887 the Craven Committee elected him to a Travelling Fellowship, which enabled him to spend the greater part of the next two years on the continent. He had proposed to work on Greek palaeography and the transmission of the text of Homer, and the Committee was so pleased by the first results that they voted to award him the large sum of £500 so that he might be able to continue his work. In 1890 he was appointed first lecturer, then Fellow of his college, and as the then Senior Tutor wrote ‘the election was made without examination, a compliment which has never before been paid to anyone by this college’.

Allen’s election at Queen’s was preceded by an episode at another college. The story may seem strange, but it comes from an impeccable oral tradition. He was on the point of being elected to a Studentship at Christ Church, when the Dean, Henry Liddell, who was on the verge of retiring, somehow discovered that Allen had never been baptized. This appalling revelation caused the college to change its mind. One of the other members of the governing body recalled that he had a young relative who might be suitable to occupy the post of classical tutor, and before long that young relative was elected. He turned out to be a disastrous choice, and whatever one may think of Allen’s subsequent performance as a scholar and teacher it is clear that Christ Church paid an inordinate price for its religious scruples.

It would be interesting to know who encouraged Allen to take up the study of Greek manuscripts. One may suggest that Bywater had a hand in it. The idea was a good one, and soon bore fruit. By the time he was 28, Allen had published two small books and gained a great deal of palaeographical experience by travelling in Italy and elsewhere looking at manuscripts both in the famous and in the lesser collections. The first of the two books was *Notes on abbreviations in Greek manuscripts*. Issued in 1889, it earned the distinction of being reprinted more than a decade after its author’s death. Though it is far from being a complete and systematic guide to this part of the subject, it is a simple and useful aid for the beginner or the more advanced student, who may easily be deterred on being told that the only more comprehensive alternative is the study in Russian by G. F. Tsereteli. The best indication that can be given of the merit of Allen’s work is that a few years ago a very learned colleague of the

present writer said that in dealing with a particular point he had found better guidance in Allen than in Tsereteli.

Allen's second book came out in the following year. It was a revised reprint of two articles from the learned journals under the title *Notes on Greek manuscripts in Italian libraries*. The contents have now been overtaken by more recent work, but in its day it served a purpose. It proved how much experience the young scholar was acquiring; at a time when photographs were not usually cheap or easy to obtain this was very important, and even now the need for the palaeographer to see originals rather than photos has not disappeared. Allen assembled a good deal of information of value to specialists in a period when published catalogues were at best inadequate and sometimes non-existent. Lovers of Italy will only regret that, travelling as he did in an age when Italy must have been extremely picturesque, he did not see fit to make a chronicle of his impressions and experiences; there is no English equivalent of Gregorovius' *Wanderjahre in Italien*.

But while in Italy Allen did not spend all his time in the libraries. Indeed then as now the opening hours provided a cast-iron excuse for other activity. And one other thing Allen did achieve in Italy: in Florence he met Miss Laura Hope, and after an acquaintance of little more than two months they became engaged on 27 February 1890. Neither of them had adequate financial means; she was the daughter of an eccentric military man turned diplomat, who later ruined himself by the expenditure incurred in indulging his mania for the design of guns and ammunition. Although Allen was elected to his Fellowship in the year of their engagement, the marriage did not take place until 1894. They set up house at 6 Canterbury Road, still apparently in some financial difficulty, since Mrs Allen's aunt Annie and sister Jessie took part of the house and contributed to the expenses.

Allen's marriage was not a great success. His wife was a Christian Scientist and this fact in due course led to a great disaster in his life. His daughter Charlotte, born in 1896, died at the age of 23 as a result of strict adherence to the rule against seeking medical help in illness. She had been a clever girl, as is proved by an unpublished journal which she kept for part of the year 1910; it displays great precocity and furnishes a few side-lights on her father. There is an indication that the relation between her parents was somewhat distant. It is very much to Allen's credit that in later years he remained completely loyal to his wife, who died in 1936; it is also understandable that in his last years his mind sometimes wandered, out of distraction at his earlier loss.

The marriage would perhaps have taken place sooner had Allen been successful in his application for the chair of Humanity at Edinburgh in

1891, which might have given him a better income. In support of his application he assembled and printed as a booklet a collection of testimonials, and from these one gets some idea of his standing in Oxford and elsewhere by this stage in his career. There are no less than 23 eulogies of him. In Oxford he was already able to enjoy the esteem of Gilbert Murray; from London support came not merely from his old teachers but from Sir Edward Maunde Thompson; and among foreign scholars he had succeeded in impressing Henri Omont, Domenico Comparetti and the Italian minister of education Pasquale Villari.

The electors preferred another candidate. At the end of the decade, Allen made a second bid for a chair, this time aspiring to succeed Murray in the chair of Greek in Glasgow. He contented himself on this occasion with a collection of 16 letters of recommendation. The range of support was again impressive; he now had the weight of Bywater behind him. The tutorial committee of his college also spoke very well of him as a teacher. Unexpected additional testimony comes from the Principal of Royal Holloway College, where from 1893 onwards he had been a regular part-time lecturer. The electors disappointed him a second time.

The strictly palaeographical side of Allen's scholarship has already been mentioned. In addition to the publications noted above one should perhaps also record a paper in the *Journal of Philology* for 1892 in which he identified the work of a 9th-century Byzantine scribe responsible for the production of a number of important manuscripts of philosophical texts. This article continues to be cited regularly in studies of the evidence for the so-called first Byzantine Renaissance, which took place in the lifetime of the patriarch Photius and was probably inspired by him. Allen also contributed prefaces to the facsimile reproductions of two of the most important classical manuscripts, the Bodleian Plato and the Venice Aristophanes. Later, in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* for 1920, he wrote another much-cited paper on the origins of the Greek minuscule hand.

At an early stage in his career Allen was already devoting much energy to his other main concern, which was Homer. He collated innumerable manuscripts, and this work in due course led to the publication of the Oxford Classical Text of both epics (the *Iliad* in collaboration with D. B. Monro) and an *editio maior* of the *Iliad*. He was partly responsible for an edition of the *Hymns*. There also came from his pen a monograph called *Homer: the origins and the transmission* on which Gilbert Murray passed judgement in trenchant style in the *Classical Review* for 1925. His apparent achievement in preparing editions based on a systematic study of the papyri and manuscripts, which are exceedingly numerous because of the unchallenged position of Homer in the ancient and medieval curriculum, excited praise and admiration in almost all quarters. Even the Germans

were impressed by his energy. It is now quite certain that they should not have been. Giorgio Pasquali in his *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* pointed out that his classification of the *Iliad* manuscripts was essentially flawed. In recent years scholars wishing to test and build upon Allen's results relating to both epics have found a state of affairs which can only excite dismay. There is so much inaccuracy in what Allen states about the readings of the manuscripts that one cannot rely on him at all. This adverse judgement is not offered in a spirit of unreasonable perfectionism; yet there is no escaping the sad conclusion. One is obliged to say that the Oxford Classical Text needs to be replaced by an edition of the accuracy and precision achieved by the average conscientious scholar.

When one looks at the matter a little more closely it can only be thought surprising that the weakness in Allen's work was not exposed sooner. It may well be that the electors to the Glasgow chair realized what the truth must be. If so, they behaved with a discretion and reticence which were not beneficial to the progress of scholarship. Allen had claimed in his letter to them that he had collated more than 100 manuscripts of the *Iliad*. The most elementary calculation proves that his boast cannot be taken literally. He had been at work some 10 years, so that on average he would have had to collate 10 manuscripts every year. But collation is a very slow business, and to collate a copy of the *Iliad* in a month would be quite an achievement if one had nothing else to do. Allen had many other things to do; he had thrown himself into the tutorial activity of his college and he had accepted additional teaching tasks outside Oxford.

At this distance in time it is scarcely possible to say much about Allen's academic contribution to the life of the college. He was Senior Tutor for a time, which is an administrative burden frequently endured by those elected to a tutorial fellowship in an Oxford college. It is known that he took an interest in his pupils, and entertained them generously. Probably his most eminent pupil was John Jackson, whose posthumous work *Marginalia scaenica* is one of the best contributions to the textual criticism of Greek drama made this century. But Allen's tutorials were apparently old-fashioned even by the standards of the time. Another eminent pupil has described to me his experience of going to Allen for Greek prose composition. He and Allen sat side by side at a desk, and Allen began to examine the pupil's efforts with blue pencil raised. He read the first clause, paused for a few moments, and then said 'Not Greek'. The blue pencil descended, to cross out what the pupil had written. Then the pencil was raised, and Allen examined the next clause. After precisely the same interval the same formula 'Not Greek' was pronounced, and the blue pencil descended to perform its office. The routine continued until there was nothing left of the pupil's offering; at which point Allen would bid him go into

the next room and transcribe a fair copy from a book lying open on the desk. That task completed, the pupil was given his work for the next week and dismissed. It is reported that another pupil, the late John Bell, had an interesting experience in one of these tutorials. When making his transcript of the fair copy he found in it a phrase which was identical with his own effort and yet had been objected to by Allen. With great courage he drew attention to the fact, and elicited a Delphic response: 'Oh dear, how very careless of me.'

These authentic accounts may give some colour to a story deeply entrenched in Oxford oral tradition, and possibly therefore *ben trovato*. Allen was examining in Honour Moderations and having completed his task, probably as an assessor rather than as a full member of the board, went off to Deauville for a holiday. It was discovered that one set of marks due from him had not been received by the chairman. Luckily it was known where Allen had gone, and a telegram was sent, begging him to supply the missing information. It elicited a reply which, even allowing for the demands of the genre, seemed very laconic. It ran 'All beta minus'.

As a figure in the social life of the college Allen was considerable. He was tall and very good-looking, and was often referred to as The God or The Greek God. He encouraged musical life in the college and was the patron of an undergraduate dining club. He had made his mark as a young don by giving splendid dinner parties on the lawn in the front quad during the long vacation. His gastronomic interests seem to have been widely known, as is suggested by the following account of an outing he made in 1923-4, reported in John Fothergill's *The diary of an innkeeper*:

A Dining Club

I had a letter from the Queen's College, asking for an elaborate dinner, for two, each dish meticulously described; for instance, pheasant (shooting had begun only the day before) without 'bread poultice, gravel or fried counters', and so on. But disliking to have undergrads spending extravagantly I got ready a very nice meal though I winkled their oysters, so to speak, all the way through: chicken, for instance, instead of gun-warm pheasant, and for aubergines stuffed cucumber. They arrived and weren't undergraduates at all, but, as I learnt afterwards, T. W. Allen, Fellow of Queen's College, and Dr Cowley, Curator of the Bodleian, the two undisputed reigning epicures of Oxford. Allen had, at least, his bottle of Château d'Yquem 1914, and 'Cowles' his Château Lafite 1907. After dinner, said Allen heavily: 'We are a dining club, we've dined together for twenty-five years. Once we had a guest, but never again. This is the first time we've dined out of College, but we shall return.' They never did. I couldn't tell them the reason why I had economized, I was so sick about it all. Anyhow Dr Cowley, at least, got the O.M. later.

Fothergill is wrong in his remark about the O.M.—Cowley and Allen were both Fellows of the Academy—and he seems unaware of the irony in the word ‘return’.

His other hobbies included fencing. Further light on how he spent his time comes from an episode in his daughter’s diary. ‘We went to Papa’s rooms, which were plunged in darkness and solitude, and when we turned the lights up the first thing we saw on a small table was a *Daily Mail* sixpenny novel, called *The Pink ’Un and the Pelican*, and Papa had said only the other day that novels did not stimulate the mind so he never read them.’

At one time he had perhaps been excessively abrupt. His daughter notes that he was prone to say things which were carelessly critical and led to estrangement. Perhaps that is why he did not keep in touch with the sister who married a classicist of some eminence, J. P. Postgate. In later years he did not create this impression, being a benevolent presence at high table to junior colleagues. He would sometimes take the trouble to invite them to lunch at his house. His kindness to the young comes out in a story from the thirties. The butler noticed that Allen had put his name down for dinner with a guest, but had forgotten to indicate the guest’s name, information useful to the fellow whose duty it was to make a seating plan. On being asked the name of his guest Allen replied: ‘I don’t know; he is a young man who stopped me in the quad and asked me a question about the manuscripts of Theognis. I couldn’t answer it at the time, so I’ve invited him to dinner.’ One may guess that the young man was Douglas (D.C.C.) Young, who later produced the Teubner edition of Theognis.

In the common room he was a vigorous talker, quite free from humbug and good at deflating the self-important without causing offence, almost a figure from the pages of a Peacock novel. He had a fund of humorous anecdotes, which never descended to malice. He dined regularly, continuing even after the end of the second world war to appear in dinner jacket, his outfit being marred a trifle by the need to wear tennis shoes to suit his gouty feet. His main weakness appears to have been a habit displayed at dessert after dinner, for which his colleague Edgar Lobel was somewhat critical of him. Allen had a sweet tooth and would monopolize the dish of chocolates, squeezing each one in turn to see if it had a soft centre; if it did, he ate it. Lobel could of course be very severe in his comments on other classical scholars when provoked; but it is not recorded that he ever spoke ill of Allen, and this argument from silence is perhaps the right note to use as the conclusion of this notice. Allen’s vigorous yet courteous manner earned him the respect of the college, a fact which should weigh in our overall judgement of him. The good will was reciprocated, and only a

month before his death he wrote, 'Since I came up in 1881 I have met with nothing but kindness from the college'.

NIGEL WILSON

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