

## EDWARD BYLES COWELL

THE late Professor Cowell was born on January 23, 1826, at Ipswich. His father, a merchant, took a prominent part in the civic life of the town, and was an able public speaker; he was also a man of large ideals, corresponded with George Grote and William Cobbett, and read Bentham and Hallam, Guizot and Arnold. The father died when Cowell, then only sixteen, was still at the Ipswich Grammar School, a studious lad, too short-sighted for games, but devoted to reading. He used to frequent the small public library at Ipswich, and when fifteen years old had found there a copy of Sir William Jones's Works, and had read his translation of the famous drama *Śakuntalā*, written in Sanskrit and Prakrit. In his address to the Royal Asiatic Society on the occasion of his being presented, in 1898, with the Society's Gold Medal, he said: 'I well remember the joy of finding a Persian grammar among his (Sir William Jones's) works, and I soon learned the characters and, with the aid of a glossary at the end, began to study the anthology of beautiful extracts with which he illustrates his rules. It was with Jones's Grammar that, some thirteen years afterwards at Oxford, I gave Fitzgerald his first lesson in the Persian alphabet.'

He saved up his pocket-money, about the same time, to purchase a copy of Wilson's *Sanskrit Grammar*. And soon after this he was introduced to Colonel Hockley, an old Bombay officer settled in Ipswich. With him he read Persian poetry, his first introduction into the unknown Oriental world. On his father's death he had to take up the business, and carry it on till his younger brother should be able to take his place. This was, of course, a serious task for one so young, but he nevertheless found time in the early morning to carry on his Persian studies. And during the years 1842-7 he published in various periodicals a number of translations of extracts from Persian poetry.

In 1845 he became engaged to marry Miss Charlesworth, daughter of the Rev. John Charlesworth, rector of Flowton near Ipswich, and began the study of Sanskrit with his betrothed. The marriage

took place on October 23, 1847, and throughout their long and happy married life, Mrs. Cowell was a constant help and comrade to him in all his literary work and aspiration. In 1850 his younger brother, Charles Henry, becoming competent to take over the office work, Cowell was able to think seriously of devoting his life to Oriental studies, and, for that purpose, of going to Oxford. He matriculated in that year, and, being a married man, lived in lodgings, and entered his name at Magdalen Hall. Professor Wilson was then Boden Professor of Sanskrit, and with him Cowell used to read Sanskrit every week.

In 1853 he published his first important work—his edition, with notes and translation, of Vararuchi's *Prakrit Grammar*. In 1856 he was appointed Professor of History and Political Economy in the Presidency College, Calcutta, and in 1858 became President of the Sanskrit College in that city. There he remained for six years, leading the strenuous simple life of an enthusiastic teacher and scholar, both learning and teaching Sanskrit, carrying on his Persian studies, writing learned articles in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, more popular articles in more popular journals, superintending the work and organization of the college, and editing Sanskrit texts. He says in a letter of this period: 'Besides my daily lectures in two colleges, always four and frequently five hours, I am secretary of the Asiatic Society, editor of two Sanskrit books in the press, member of the University Senate, &c., &c., so that "from morn to dewy eve" life runs on in an endless round of things to be done which can only be got through by vigorously dispatching every duty as it comes, and taking as little credit as possible from the morrow.'

In 1864 he came home on leave, and when, shortly afterwards, the Professorship of Sanskrit was established at the University of Cambridge, he applied for the post and was successful. The duties were not light. The chair had been established with a view as much, or more, to the teaching of comparative philology as to the teaching of Sanskrit. Cowell had devoted little or no attention to this subject. He had to work it up for the lectures. He lectured also on Persian, and in all these subjects did all the most elementary as well as the more advanced teaching. The classes were not large, often only one or two, but they were numerous; and Cowell's ideal of teaching was unstinting in its generosity. 'When the patient exposition of verbal elements was done, some allusion or name, or some classical passage illustrating a grammatical point, would open the treasures of his learning. He poured out the wonders of Eastern thought and fancy

not as one who has read them in books, but as one who has lived with them<sup>1</sup>. With such teaching the hours fly, and it is not surprising to find that for many years the zealous teacher was unable to complete any original book of his own, though he contributed a number of reviews to popular periodicals, and about an article a year to one or other of the learned journals.

In 1878 he published in the *Bibliotheca Indica*, with a translation, one important text of the mediaeval philosophy of the brahmins; and completed an edition of another left unfinished by Professor Goldstücker. In 1882 he published, in collaboration with Professor Gough, the translation of a tractate by a fourteenth-century brahmin giving an abstract of the philosophical views held in a number of the various schools of thought in India. In 1886 appeared, this time in collaboration with Mr. Neil, the Sanskrit text of a large collection of Buddhist legends, dating from about the third century A.D. In 1893 and 1894 he issued the text and translation of another work in Buddhist Sanskrit—a poem in eighteen cantos on the life of the Buddha, about a century older than the last. He was continually working during these last years at the translation of the huge collection of Buddhist Jātaka stories, in Pali of the fifth century. But he called himself only the editor, and gave all the credit of authorship to the collaborators—Mr. Chalmers, Mr. Neil, Dr. Rouse, and Mr. Francis. Finally, in 1897, he published, in collaboration with Mr. F. W. Thomas, the translation of a romance founded on historical incidents, written in very difficult and allusive Sanskrit of the seventh century.

If we look at this list and bear in mind also the books he had previously published in Calcutta we are struck by two facts—firstly the very wide range of his studies, and secondly his constant habit of working together with others.

The texts he edited or translated belong to almost all the many phases in the long history of the development of the literary forms of language in India. From the Taittirīya Veda through the Upanishads, the early and late Buddhist Sanskrit, the Pali of the fifth-century commentators, the classical Sanskrit and the Prakrits, down to the mediaeval scholastics, he knew them all, though they differed from one another more than the earliest Latin from the latest Italian. No Indianist has had the same mastery. The Jaina Māgadhī and the earliest Pali are the only important literary dialects with which he was not familiar. And all this was only a part of his linguistic attainment. Late in life, during several visits to Wales,

<sup>1</sup> Sir Frederick Pollock in the *Pilot*, Feb. 21, 1903.

he became interested in the language, and taking up this difficult study for the mere pleasure of it, was able to contribute, in 1878 and 1882, important papers to the learned journal of experts in Welsh, the *Y Cymmrodor*. He spent much time in reading Italian and Spanish and, up to the last, kept up his knowledge of the classics and of Persian poetry. To this he added the study of the ancient Persian, the Zend of the Zoroastrian books. And his very last article, written in 1902 for the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, was a translation of three episodes from a poem in old Bengālī. Cowell's interest in this vast range of inquiry was philological, literary, and philosophical, rather than historical. How thankful we should have been for a work from his hand on the curious history of the literary languages of India, or on the gradual changes in philosophic thought, or on the evolution of logical theory and the methods of reasoning.

The other point to which allusion has been made is Cowell's habit of working with others, and especially with younger scholars. This arose no doubt partly from the desire to encourage them to undertake work which they would otherwise have scarcely ventured to begin. But like his willingness to carry to completion work left unfinished by others, often a very thankless and always a tedious task, it was evidence also both of the peculiar modesty and generosity of his character and of his simple-hearted devotion to the cause of knowledge. Beneath that retiring exterior there beat, all unsuspected by most, the heart of a missionary. One cannot do better than quote the closing words of the address he himself gave at his last public appearance. It was at the presentation to him, already referred to, of the Gold Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society. After referring to the influence of Hamilton, from whom, then a prisoner at Paris, Schlegel 'caught the enthusiasm,' as Cowell calls it, he goes on:—

'There is nothing more interesting than to trace, where it is possible, these electric currents of influence: but how many such there must be which we can never know! Each of us can exercise this influence around us, to help on that investigation of arts, sciences, and literature, in relation to Asia, for which our Society was founded. . . . *Tat tvam asi*, "That art thou," may well ring in our ears when we would join any great movement, whether it be in the sphere of religion, philanthropy, science, or literature. Each of us can feel that he is himself a part of the movement; he has a share in its work, a personal stake in its success. All the members of the Royal Asiatic Society are fellow workers in a noble cause. "Lux ex oriente" is their motto; to help in the diffusion of that light is their work. The several generations of members pass away, but they are all

continuously linked together by their common aim; and the former and the present members are all parts of one long series:

‘Et quasi cursores vitā lampada tradunt<sup>1</sup>.’

With what devotion he himself lived up to this noble ideal is proved by the whole record of his life. The story of it has been amply and admirably told by Mr. George Cowell in the just published *Life and Letters of Edward Byles Cowell* (London, 1904), which gives a most interesting and touching picture of Cowell both as a scholar and a man. Appended to it is a full bibliography of all the articles and books he wrote; but his *karma* survives also, and perhaps in a more potent form, in the inspiring influence felt by those of us who had the good fortune to come into personal contact with him.

T. W. RHYS DAVIDS.

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1898, p. 693.