



LORD CHALMERS

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1858-1938

ROBERT CHALMERS, the only son of the late John Chalmers and Julia Mackay, was born in London on 18 August 1858. He was educated at the City of London School, where he was admitted to the foundation as a 'John Carpenter' scholar. There he came under the influence of Dr. Edwin Abbott Abbott, one of the great headmasters of those days, whose fine scholarship, masterly teaching, and striking character had attracted able pupils both from London and the provinces. H. H. Asquith (Lord Oxford and Asquith) and his brother had been at the School a few years earlier and among Chalmers's contemporaries were A. H. Bullen, Cecil Bendall, G. A. Stevenson, H. C. Beeching, P. A. Barnett, P. E. Matheson, S. L. Lee (later Sir Sidney Lee), M. Platnauer, W. Rhys Roberts, Ronald Bayne, E. H. Dament, and A. Buchheim, more than one of whom made their mark in the Church, in literature, the Civil Service, and in academic life. It was a lively atmosphere, where gloomy surroundings were in some measure relieved by the fortunate neighbourhood of two great Libraries, the Guildhall Library and that of the London Institution, of which the Sixth Form of the School made frequent use. In these surroundings Chalmers was a leading figure, conspicuous for his humour and his ready and often mordant wit, and a somewhat superior manner, which he always retained. Success modified what seemed in early days a pose, and those who knew and worked with him soon discovered that it concealed a sensitive and generous character.

In Chalmers, Dr. Abbott found a pupil after his own heart, describing him later as an exact and tasteful scholar who wrote good and vigorous composition in Greek and Latin, had some knowledge of Sanskrit, and had made a special study of Philology.

Chalmers's admiration for Abbott was unbounded, and it was his habit all through life to speak of him. There can be no doubt that Abbott's influence had the largest share in forming his literary taste and inspiring him with a zeal for scholarship and public service. This influence extended to matters political and religious; he remained staunchly Anglican, conservative in matters of classical scholarship, but liberal in politics.

From the City of London School he went up in 1877 with a classical scholarship to Oriel College, Oxford, where he studied classics until Moderations, in which he took a first class. At that point he deserted classics for Natural Science (Biological subjects), taking a second in the Final School in 1881, a disappointment to himself and his friends. There is no doubt that for a time he thought of adopting medicine as a career. In pursuance of this idea he worked for a short time in Edinburgh, and for years in his early days at the Treasury he would humorously speak of himself from time to time as being still a 'registered medical student' at Edinburgh.

Dropping the idea of medicine, he entered in 1882 for the open competition (Class I) for the Home Civil Service, and came out first on the list, with a total number of marks which was then a record under the scheme permitting any number of subjects to be taken. (Incidentally, besides good marks in classics, he was given the maximum possible—after the fixed deduction—for two subjects in natural science.) This success brought him into the Treasury. The Upper Division of the Treasury, as then organized, consisted (below the Secretaries) of 'Principal Clerks', 'First Class Clerks', and 'Second Class Clerks' (generally known as 'juniors'). His progress through the classes was at a normal rate—Second Class Clerk 14 August 1882, First Class Clerk 15 April 1894, Principal Clerk 25 February 1899, Assistant Secretary 1 April 1903. He was never private secretary to a Secretary or Minister, perhaps because his ambitions did not lie that way. As a 'junior' he

worked first in the division which at that time dealt with correspondence from the War Office, Admiralty, India Office, and Colonial Office. It was then that he became familiar with the currencies of the various dependencies; the subject interested him and, concurrently with his ordinary work, he was able to compile a comprehensive memorandum which was published later (in 1893) as a *History of Currency in the British Colonies* and became the standard work on the subject. The late Professor Harold Temperley, Master of Peterhouse, wrote of this work:

His first work of research was a testimony to his determination. An official manual on currency written in 1848 had become obsolete. Chalmers resolved to revise and rewrite it, and produced, in 1893, the 'History of the Currencies of the British Empire'. He obtained permission from the Master of the Rolls to unlock the gates of the Record Office after dark. There, guided by Hubert Hall, he burned the midnight oil over manuscripts dealing with the history of every British Colony. He estimated the values, at different periods, of Spanish dollars, Maltese scudi, Dutch guilders, Sicca rupees, Turkish piasters, and Black Dogs of St. Vincent. Nor did he neglect the tobacco currency of Bermuda or that still stranger currency of the Leeward Isles, with 'a dual standard based primarily on commodities, secondarily on coins'. The result was a monument of exotic erudition of which few imperial historians have ever heard but which all of them, as well as economists, would be the better for reading. As Chalmers himself wrote, 'the field is a new one'; and 'there are few experiments in currency which that history does not record, and no blunders of which it does not indicate the punishment'.

Among the tributes he received on the publication of this work was a letter from Mr. Gladstone in very eulogistic terms. His services as Secretary of the Indian Currency Committee brought him the honour of a C.B. in 1900.

On promotion he was fortunate in the fact that he was able to serve most of his time in the division of the Treasury then dealing with pure finance as distinct from Treasury Control over other departments. It is in its Finance Divisions that the Treasury has the greatest power of initiative, and the head of the single Finance Division of those

days, ordinarily (with the heads of the Revenue Departments) the principal adviser of the Chancellor of the Exchequer on matters of policy, had to be in touch with, and able to hold his own in, matters of 'high finance' outside the Treasury, in connexion with the Bank of England and banking generally, questions of revenue and taxation, fiduciary issues, coinage, debt, international finance, the exchanges, &c.

There is no doubt of the outstanding ability and success with which he discharged the duties of the Treasury; moreover, he impressed by his personality, and this contributed sensibly to the weight attached to his advice. On 28 October 1907 he was appointed Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue. In this way his essential connexion with the Budget and the Treasury continued unbroken.

At that time the Custom House dealt with Customs, and the Inland Revenue dealt not only with direct taxation but with the Excise. Chalmers perceived that for purposes of administration the Customs and Excise were homogeneous, while Excise and Income Tax were not. It is probable that the transfer of the Excise to the Customs Department, for which power was obtained in Section 4 of the Finance Act, 1908, was entirely due to him. In the same year he was given the K.C.B.

It was natural that on the retirement of Sir George Murray in 1911, he should be asked to return to the Treasury as Permanent Secretary and Auditor of the Civil List, a change as to which at the time he felt some misgivings because it was a change to a 'dog's life' from a position of dignity and comparative independence. Incidentally he served on the Royal Commission on Indian Finance and Currency, 1913.

He had tired of the Permanent Secretaryship of the Treasury by 1913, when he was offered and accepted the Governorship of Ceylon (26 September). His duties in Ceylon began in October 1913. His study of Pali gave him a special interest in the Buddhists of Ceylon, but the work

there did not call out his special qualities, though it gave him the opportunity of seeing Buddhist institutions and of making personal acquaintance with native Pali scholars. Some riots in May and June 1915, which arose from religious and racial feeling between the Singhalese Buddhists and Mohammedans from India, threw a shadow over his last months in the island. One characteristic incident in Ceylon may be recorded. Chalmers showed his remembrance of old Oxford associations by erecting a marble cross on the grave of an Oriel friend and contemporary, Father Walker, who died in 1915, with an inscription 'Oriellensis Oriellensi pon. cur. R.C.' In December 1915, at the urgent request of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. McKenna), he consented to relinquish the Governorship and return to the Treasury as additional Joint Permanent Secretary in view of the extreme pressure on the Department caused by the War. After giving two months' service during leave from Ceylon he was substantively re-appointed on 4 March 1916, having in the meantime been created G.C.B.

He enjoyed at all times the confidence and esteem of Mr. Asquith (later the Earl of Oxford and Asquith), at whose request he acted temporarily (from May to September 1916) as Under Secretary for Ireland during the troubles; as Under Secretary he was sworn a member of the Irish Privy Council. He returned to the Treasury, and retired finally on 31 March 1919. The Treasury Minute on the occasion of his retirement ends with the following paragraph, which is quoted with the permission of the Treasury.

Such a record of service speaks for itself. There cannot be many instances in the long line of his predecessors where tasks of such difficulty and diversity have been heaped in quick succession on the shoulders of a single man. At the Board of Inland Revenue, at the Treasury, in Ceylon, in Ireland, and again at the Treasury, Sir Robert Chalmers has shown unfailing resource, sound judgment, cool courage, and constant and unwearied devotion to the

public service. The appointments which he has filled and the circumstances in which he was called to them are the best testimony to the high esteem in which he was held by those under whom he served, but My Lords desire on the occasion of his retirement to place on formal record Their warm appreciation of his great public services and to offer him Their hearty good wishes.

To his colleagues at the Treasury he was all that could be desired in a chief. Men of his own generation, more or less, in the Treasury and other departments his whimsical humour led him to call by some other name than their surnames—their Christian names or nicknames, of which he was a prolific inventor, based on some literary source, often Dickens, or clever puns or plays on words. His influence on his juniors was of the best. He did not himself write long memoranda and he did not encourage them in his juniors; he trusted them to present all the facts shortly, and if they wished, to end with a specific proposal. He wanted them to come to a quick decision. Behind his dignified manner he concealed a wonderful human sympathy for the young.

In recording Lord Chalmers's early days in the Treasury, the social work which he carried on outside his official duties should be mentioned. Like many others of his generation at Oxford, immediately on leaving Oxford he took up social welfare work in the East End under the then vicar of St. Jude's, Whitechapel, the Rev. Samuel Barnett, and his curate, now Canon Thory Gardiner. For this purpose he lived for some time in Whitechapel, sharing rooms with the late Rev. Charles L. Marson, also one of the curates of St. Jude's. His sympathy for the poor, especially for the suffering poor, was unbounded; he would visit them, sit with them when they were sick, comfort them in every possible way. Many cases he assisted financially, especially with a view to completion of education and the finding of a career. But he preferred to do good by stealth; the idea of publicity would have been abhorrent to him. This was characteristic of him through life.

Chalmers had been made C.B. in 1900, K.C.B. in 1908, and G.C.B., an honour he greatly prized, in 1916. In 1918 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of Oriel and on his retirement in 1919 he was made Baron Chalmers of Northiam in Sussex. He had received an honorary LL.D. from Glasgow in 1913, and in 1923 he was made D.Litt. of Oxford, and honorary LL.D. of Cambridge in 1924, and of St. Andrews in 1930. From 1924 to 1931 he was a Trustee of the British Museum, and Fellow of the British Academy from 1927. He served on the Council of the Academy from 1928 to 1931, and was its first Honorary Treasurer in 1930-1. He took much interest in the business of the Academy, and was a constant attendant at its Sectional and Annual meetings. In 1919 he was appointed a member of the Royal Commission on the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, presided over by Mr. Asquith, and took much interest in its work; it reported in 1922. As a member of this Commission he stayed in Cambridge for some time in 1920. His younger son Robert having been an undergraduate of Peterhouse, he proceeded himself, *ad eundem*, to become an alumnus of the College, and during the required term of residence shared the life of the College as a Fellow Commoner. He was, therefore, well known to the College when he was elected to succeed Sir Adolphus Ward as Master of Peterhouse in 1924.

We are indebted to the article in the *Cambridge Review* of 2 December 1938 by the late Professor Temperley, then Master of Peterhouse, for an account of his life as Master, from which what follows is drawn.

During seven years as Master he won a distinctive place in Cambridge as an eminent public servant who was at once a scholar, with knowledge of Oxford and Cambridge, and an experienced man of affairs. He took no part in the politics of the University, but his knowledge and counsel were made use of in many ways. He enjoyed the society of Hall and Common Room, where he entertained many friends from Cambridge and elsewhere, among them his

old friend the present Chancellor of Cambridge, Lord Baldwin, to whom he was attached by their common love of literature and much agreement on matters of finance. But his main activity was in his College, where he saw the building of a New Court and above all things took intimate personal interest in undergraduates whom he assisted by good counsel and often by substantial help which made a difference to their lives.

To turn now to his Oriental studies. In a speech proposing Chalmers as President of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1922, the veteran Sir Henry Howorth quoted a saying of Chalmers that every man ought to drive two horses abreast, one his business or profession and the other some scholarly hobby which would give him relief from his work and occupation in later days. Chalmers chose his hobby early. Prompted partly perhaps by his study of Sanskrit at School he took up the study of Pali. The writers of this notice are indebted to Mrs. Rhys Davids, the Secretary and, since 1928, the President of the Pali Text Society, and to Professor F. W. Thomas, lately Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, for some account of his work in Pali.

He was attracted to Pali by the enthusiasm of the great scholar Professor Rhys Davids. He became his pupil and a member of the Pali Text Society, and contributed to the finance of the Society and of its projected Pali Dictionary. From Rhys Davids he took over the task of translating the *Jātaka* book; he joined the company of scholars formed by the late Professor Cowell with the object of accomplishing the translation, the first volume of which, published in 1895 and dedicated to Rhys Davids, was Chalmers's work and was much appreciated by Cowell for its spirited vigour. At the Paris Congress in 1897 he lectured on the Buddhist term *Tathāgata*. From 1895 to 1902 he was editing the first edition, commenced by Trenckner, of the text of the Second Collection (*Nikāya*) in the first Division (*Sutta-pitaka*), *Discourses of Buddha*, of the Pali Canon, the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, under the guidance of Professor Rhys Davids. This

appeared in two volumes in the years 1896–1902. He continued to work at the translation of that text, which was published by the Oxford University Press for the Pali Text Society—with an Index by Mrs. Rhys Davids—in 1926 and 1927 as *Further Dialogues of the Buddha*. It was part of the series *Sacred Books of the Buddhists* (vols. v–vi being *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Parts iv–v). His Pali studies had been delayed by his continuous work for the Treasury, but in his Cambridge period he produced his last work of scholarship, a translation of the *Sutta-Nipāta*, published in 1932 as the 37th volume of the Harvard Oriental Studies. This translation, more remarkable for its style than for its precise literary accuracy, may be considered as the most characteristic and felicitous of his translations.

Professor Thomas sums up his Pali work as follows:

He had shown his literary skill in translating the *Jātaka* and in dealing with the *Majjhima-Nikaya* he had sought out good English equivalents for technical terms of Buddhism, which students are apt, from fear of inaccuracy, to reproduce untranslated; and he had, like others, cut short those remorseless repetitions which are so burdensome to readers of Buddhist texts and often outran the patience even of the scribes. In the *Sutta-Nipāta* he was dealing with a very ancient compilation of verse, largely of ethical content and nowhere failing in human or religious interest. The texts were not composed originally for scholars or dogmatists, and in a highly skilful, terse and reliable rendering by a sound scholar, a very shrewd judge of human nature and a lover of good English, they may be taken to heart by serious students of literature and religion who are not specially interested in critical scholarship. The work may therefore come into a wider acceptance and some of its verses be quoted with pleasure.

It seems appropriate here to complete the record of Lord Chalmers's Oriental studies. He had joined the Royal Asiatic Society in 1891, and down to 1898 contributed notes to its *Journal*. In 1922, after his retirement from the Treasury, he was made President of the Society and opened the session with a paper on 'Some Indian Nuns and others'. In that year he signed as President the address to the

Société Asiatique de Paris at its Centenary. As President he fulfilled his duties with great regularity and interest, and by the dignity and efficiency with which he managed the arrangements for the Society's Centenary Meeting in July 1923 was largely responsible for its success. He made a liberal contribution to its expenses, and to the cost of the *Centenary Supplement*. Finally he came to Oxford in 1928 to preside there over the 17th International Congress of Orientalists, and from Oriel, where he resided during the session, directed the proceedings of a large and memorable Conference, attended by many scholars from the Continent, including a large representation from Germany. It may be added that on retiring from Peterhouse, Mrs. Rhys Davids informs us 'he wrote that he had severed himself from Pali studies and had given his fine Pali library to my friend and colleague Miss I. B. Horner, M.A., the Librarian of Newnham College, who is making a noble use of it'. On his retirement from Cambridge he lived quietly for some years in a Leicestershire parsonage, finishing his Pali studies. In 1925 he returned to Oxford, where he enjoyed the great happiness of his second marriage. There he lived in the society of old and new friends, among whom he found many congenial spirits, and was able to enlarge his knowledge of the country-side. His health began to fail in the summer of 1938 and he died on 17 November of that year. His funeral was in the Chapel of his old College, Oriel, and there was a memorial service in the Chapel of the Order of the Bath, Westminster Abbey.

Chalmers was a man of commanding figure and robust build, but though in his schooldays he rowed and played Rugby football, he strained his knee at Oxford and had to give up football which he had played with vigour. He lived a very strenuous life without such exercises. He was not given to foreign or extensive travel and was able to keep in health by taking holidays from time to time as occasions offered. He kept always in contact with great literature; Virgil and the *Odyssey* of Homer were never far away and,

especially in his later years, the *Divina Commedia* and *Don Quixote* were among his favourite books. Cervantes, with his mingling of romance and rich humour, appealed to a character in which these elements were singularly blended. His chief refreshment, apart from books, was the society of friends and the interplay of conversation, in which he took an active part, delighting in witty talk and humorous phrases in which his memory and power of quotation served him well; he enjoyed good food and good wine, and above all good company.

The motto that Lord Chalmers chose for his coat of arms, FELIX MERENDO, was characteristic; he had won success, and was proud of it, but the success was achieved by hard service, and the symbols on his arms embodying the memory of the two sons who had died for their country showed that this was no merely personal memorial.

From 1892 until his death Lord Chalmers was a member of the United University Club, where he was a familiar figure. He was a faithful friend and never forgot the ties of old associations. Side by side with his public life, which was marked by a dignity that served him well in the many offices where he presided, he retained his strong affection for family and friends, and not least for those whose education and career he had assisted with rare generosity.

Lord Chalmers married in 1888 Maud Mary, daughter of the late John George Forde Pigott; she died in 1923. In 1935 he married Iris, widow of Professor Robert Latta of the University of Glasgow. By his first marriage he had two sons, Ralph and Robert; the former became a professional soldier, the latter a barrister. Both served with great gallantry in the War and both were killed in the month of May 1915. He had also a daughter, Mabel, who married Sir Malcolm Stevenson, K.C.M.G., and after his death, Mr. R. G. D. Laffan, Fellow of Queens' College, Cambridge. As Lord Chalmers died without surviving male issue, the peerage becomes extinct.

[The materials for this memoir were collected, and part of the

draft prepared, by Sir Thomas Heath, F.B.A., who was one of Lord Chalmers's colleagues at the Treasury. Sir Thomas being unable, for reasons of health, to complete the task, it was undertaken by Mr. P. E. Matheson, who was acquainted with Lord Chalmers from their schooldays. Sir Thomas Southorn, now Governor of the Gambia, and formerly Private Secretary to Lord Chalmers in Ceylon, had promised to contribute an account of his administration there, but war conditions have made this impossible. For the estimate of his contributions to Pali studies, Mr. Matheson acknowledges his indebtedness to Mrs. Rhys Davids and Professor F. W. Thomas.]