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DONALD STRUAN ROBERTSON

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1885-1961

**D**ONALD STRUAN ROBERTSON was born on the 28th of June 1885, the last child and only son of Henry Robert Robertson, an etcher and painter of Scottish ancestry, and of Agnes Lucy (*née* Turner), a descendant of Robert Chamberlain of the Worcester China Works. His three sisters were all strongly individual personalities: Margaret became a feminist, Janet a painter of children, and Agnes, the eldest, who married Newell Arber, was one of the earliest women Fellows of the Royal Society. The last, a botanist of philosophical trend and accomplished with her pencil, was the sister with whom he later maintained the closest connexion, partly because she also lived in Cambridge. The family resided at Primrose Hill, and excursions with his father to the country, then more easily reached than today, introduced him to a lifelong source of pleasure. He was sent to Westminster School, where he was in Grant's house, as a day-boy, although in his last year he had a period as a boarder. It is not remembered for which birthday he asked for a guinea-pig and a pocket Homer, but a love for literature and the possession of books was his from early days. He would often make the long walk back to Hampstead bearing a volume that he had, by saving his bus-fare, been able to secure in the Charing Cross Road. Although he was to find the university more congenial than school, he was always proud and glad to have been at Westminster, and in later life was for a time one of its Governors. Among the friendships which began there were those with H. St. J. B. Philby, the Arabian explorer, and John Spedan Lewis; with the latter he shared an interest, not much approved by his more respectable relatives, in gipsies; they would pass one another notes in Romany, further disguised by being written in the Greek alphabet.

That Robertson became a Cambridge man rather than an Oxonian was entirely due to the advice of his headmaster, James Gow, who had no doubt which university would suit him better. He went up to Trinity as a Major Entrance Scholar in 1904. Twenty-five years later, in his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Greek, he described the excitement aroused in him by the teaching of Verrall. Two other members of the remarkable Trinity classical staff of that time were not many years older

than himself, Ernest Harrison and Francis Cornford; both won his admiration and were to become valued friends; his particular appreciation of the former appears in two perceptive obituaries written in 1943. In the undergraduate life of the college he found himself very much at home: his sparkling charm and unforced interest in others brought him numerous friendships. A list of names would be tedious, but at the risk of invidiousness one must mention three classical scholars, Hugh Stewart, Andrew Gow, and Arnold Gomme, and the mathematician G. H. Hardy. Momentarily his career was threatened by an incident when one May morning, impersonating the Archangel Gabriel, he scaled the roof of the Wren Library to sound the last trump at dawn. The resentment of the fellows inhabiting Nevile's Court fortunately did not go so far as to insist on rustication. Robertson's name appeared in the First Division of the First Class in Part I of the Classical Tripos in 1906, in which year he also won the Members' Latin Essay Prize; in 1907 he was Pitt Scholar, and *proxime accessit* to the slightly younger Gow for the Porson Prize for Greek Iambics; in 1908, after being First Chancellor's Medallist, he was placed in the First Class of the very specialized Part II, taken that year by only a dozen candidates. His subject in Part II was Classical Archaeology, and while working for it he collected material for, and helped in the writing of, some chapters of Charles (later Sir Charles) Waldstein's *Herculaneum, Past, Present and Future* (1908); but when, as Charles Oldham Scholar, he stayed up another year to compete for a fellowship, he returned to literature, writing a dissertation on Apuleius and the pseudo-Lucianic *Ass*. The dissertation brought him election in October 1909 to a fellowship, tenable at that time without obligations for six years.

The fellowship made marriage possible. He was already engaged to Petica Coursolles Jones, daughter of Major Charles Jones of the Royal Artillery. This had come about through a walking-tour, on which he had been taken by a friend, then engaged to Petica's sister, who, for her part, had taken Petica. On both sides it was love at first sight. Now in the autumn of 1909 they were both, though for different reasons, in Rome, and with what was for him at least characteristic impulsiveness and disregard of conventionalities, they were married by the British Consul. Later they settled in Cambridge at 2 Huntingdon Road. Their first child, Martin, was born in the autumn of 1911, followed two years later by Giles. Meanwhile Robertson was appointed to the staff of Trinity College as Assistant

Lecturer in Classics in 1911 and was confirmed as Lecturer in 1914. College supervision today sometimes degenerates into coaching for examinations. That criticism certainly could not be made of Robertson's methods. The Trinity undergraduate was expected to teach himself. Robertson would encourage him to read and stimulate him by communicating something of his own enthusiasm. But the modern word 'instruction' was alien to his ways. To some extent this was due to modesty: he was not ready enough to believe that he was right and his pupil wrong. Among the pieces he used for composition was one by Ben Jonson which contained the sentence 'No more would I tell a green writer all his faults, lest I should make him grieve and faint, and at last despair'. This excellent advice he carried too far: his pupils could have accepted more criticism without becoming despondent.

The outbreak of war in 1914 at once carried him into the army. He had served in the cavalry section of the University O.T.C., but a congenitally malformed foot, which he always disregarded as far as he could, excluded him from a fighting unit. He was commissioned in the Army Service Corps, served in France, rose to the rank of Major, and refused a decoration. The war being over, the Robertsons settled, after various temporary abodes, at 56 Bateman Street, a tall grey-brick mid-Victorian house of somewhat gloomy exterior, but looking out at the back over the Botanic Gardens. Here they entertained a multitude of visitors and friends, Petica Robertson, at once vivacious and understanding, enjoying the exercise of her unusual gifts as hostess.

Although most of Robertson's published work and immediate projects were in other fields, his friends in Cambridge and elsewhere were aware of his wide knowledge of Greek literature, his ability to communicate his belief in its supreme value, and the keen intellect displayed in a wide-ranging output of short notes. They were delighted therefore when in 1928 he was appointed to succeed A. C. Pearson as Regius Professor of Greek. In his inaugural lecture he expressed the view that the teacher's primary duty is to make the pupil understand the text, with literary appreciation going hand-in-hand; as a warning against confusing appreciation with encomium he quoted from a hearer's notebook: 'This Ode is *also* Pindar's finest.' As for research, while stressing the difficulties and complexity of valuable research in most classical fields, he declared that it was his own strongest wish to advance the

knowledge of Pindar. For the moment, however, he was occupied in completing his edition of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, and the duties of the professorship, then including much *ex officio* examining, and others voluntarily assumed, made heavy inroads on his time. An onset of pernicious anaemia, although soon brought under control, temporarily lessened his vigour, but he was in good health again by the outbreak of the Second World War. This saw him in the uniform of a Special Constable, which appealed to his love of the picturesque. Petica Robertson was an Air Raid Warden, and in 1941 when on duty was killed by a bomb, one of the few to fall on Cambridge. This blow he met bravely, but it was a heavy one. Of the more intimate personal loss he did not speak, but he openly recognized how much she had supported him by relieving him of practical day-to-day affairs and by encouraging him in application to his writing. He found much consolation in his sons, with whom he was on terms of friendly affection, and whose growingly successful careers, well-liked wives, and increasing families were to become a source of pride and pleasure.

The death of his old teacher and friend Ernest Harrison made vacant the largest set of rooms in Trinity, facing south across the Great Court through windows from which the transoms had been removed by H. A. J. Munro when he lived there. Robertson moved into this set in the Lent Term of 1944. The massive furniture which he had inherited from his father was here seen to better advantage than in Bateman Street, and there was enough wall space to display his library, which ranged through the literature of several languages, and where rare volumes democratically rubbed shoulders with old nursery favourites. A cabinet-maker extended some large glass-fronted bookcases to fill with elegance the wall that faced the visitor who had come through the outer dining-room. In front of them Robertson might be found at his desk behind a book-tray with figures of Eros and Psyche carved for him by Petica Robertson's niece, Annabel Sprigge. Between him and the door various tables carried piles of books, papers, and periodicals, for he was orderly without being tidy. An increasingly important section of the shelves came to be occupied by a collection of Persian manuscripts. In the early part of 1941, Mrs. Nora Chadwick, who was beginning to learn Persian, had spoken to him of the peculiar quality she found in some Persian poets. There and then he announced that he, too, would learn Persian, and profiting by the presence in Cambridge of Professor Minorsky,

he rapidly gained enough knowledge of the language to find here one of his chief sources of pleasure. Later he began to buy manuscripts, enjoying their aesthetic qualities, pride of possession, and the freedom of a field of study less well-worked than the classical, a field where an amateur like himself might make discoveries. Two articles that he published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, arising from manuscripts in his ownership, tickled what he knew to be his vanity. This interest in Persian largely but not entirely superseded one in the Icelandic sagas, which he read extensively during the thirties. He always considered that, with the possible exception of Herodotus, they contained the best narrative prose in the world, and in 1950 he spent a holiday in Iceland to visit some of the saga-sites.

In 1950 he also reached what was then the retiring age of sixty-five. The next year, after some bouts of pneumonia, he developed severe angina pectoris, and his life was feared for. He was removed to the house of his old friend Mrs. Chadwick, and there nursed back to safety. He was allowed to return to his rooms in college after a lift had been installed. Cycling about the Cambridgeshire countryside, which had for many years been his favourite form of exercise, after a collision with a lorry had convinced him that it was no longer right to endanger horses by riding them in the growing traffic, was now forbidden, but slowly he was able to take longer and longer walks and lead a full life. In 1953 a young Fellow of Trinity, George Cary, son of the novelist Joyce Cary, died, leaving far advanced a work on the medieval Alexander-legend. Robertson concerned himself with arranging for its completion and publication, and this brought him into contact with Cary's widow, Margaret, daughter of Sir Eric Phipps, formerly Ambassador in Paris and elsewhere. They discovered a strong mutual attraction and were married in 1956. They bought a house in the Madingley Road, but college custom allowed Robertson to avoid, by sleeping a certain number of nights a year in college, the upheaval of leaving his rooms and moving his library. For a time he lived with no diminution of energy, taking surprisingly long walks, a favourite being to return to Cambridge from Waterbeach along the tow-path by the river, and travelling with his wife to Greece in 1959 and even, after a slight stroke, to Brittany in 1961. But his forces were then beginning to fail; there was trouble with his eyesight, and finally further strokes confined him to bed; he died in the Evelyn Nursing Home on 5 October 1961.

In this account of his life Robertson's publications have

been mentioned only in passing. His first book was *A Handbook of Greek and Roman Architecture* (1929), the outcome of a long period of lecturing on this subject. It made no claim to advance original views, but met a pressing need for a reliable work of reference; at the same time the text is consecutively written and the reader who consults it on some particular point is likely to find himself carried on to further topics, his way enlivened here by a critical judgement, there by a side-glance at some modern building. 'Its outstanding merit', wrote one reviewer, 'is that in the compass of merely 400 pages there can hardly be a Greek or Roman building of any importance that does not obtain mention, and not mere mention, but mention for the characteristic or illuminating feature.' The clarity with which the history of ancient architecture is expounded owed much to the relegation of minor works to a chronologically arranged appendix, in itself a most useful piece of tabulation. Another appendix gives explanations of Greek, Latin, and modern technical terms: many of these terms are of doubtful or fluctuating meaning, yet there was previously no treatment to which a student could be referred. Further study of ancient building is facilitated by a long bibliography arranged both by subject-matter and by sites; very little of importance was missed and, what is more, Robertson really knew the works he listed. The book was generally welcomed both by students and by scholars, who hailed it as an intelligent, critical, and cultured survey, and even the acknowledged experts in the field found little to criticize, unless it were the neglect of their own more speculative theories or of peripheral subjects like the economics of building or Roman tombs. Within ten years a second edition was called for. During this time Robertson had not lectured on architecture, having as Regius Professor directed his attention to Greek literature, while also continuing his work on Apuleius. Nevertheless he had had in mind that he would one day rewrite the *Handbook*, and had accumulated much material for this purpose. He was able to make many substantial changes in the light of criticisms or new discoveries, but was compelled to forgo any attempt to bring the whole bibliography up to date: he tried, however, to do this for the buildings and subjects discussed in the text. Although the revision was virtually complete by the end of 1940, publication was in the circumstances of the time delayed until 1943.

After completing the first edition of the *Handbook* Robertson gave some help to Andrew Gow, who had become a colleague

on the staff at Trinity, in bringing to a conclusion a time-consuming work of piety. Their friend Sir William Ridgeway had, before his death in 1926, asked them to be his literary executors, with the intention that they should publish the second volume of his *Early Age of Greece*. The preface to the first volume, published in 1901, states that the second volume is in the press; and indeed some proofs of that date were among the mass of paper with which the executors were faced. But the enthusiasm for comparative anthropology and comparative literature, characteristic of the early part of the century, had led Ridgeway to revise his ideas of what the book should contain; and any hope that he would complete it was dispersed by his progressive loss of eyesight. Robertson and Gow printed only four long chapters, which they found in proof with the author's corrections. But there was a vast amount of other material to be sorted and examined with the final conclusion that it must be destroyed. Even the matter which was in proof provided heavy work in identifying references, often left blank, and checking quotations, with regard to which Ridgeway had understandably done little: the task was the heavier in that ancient Greece had come to take a comparatively small part in the book as it grew. It was with relief that the editors saw its publication in 1931.

Robertson's most important work of original scholarship is that on the text of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*. All the manuscripts are derived from one of the eleventh century (F), preserved in the Medicean library at Florence (Laur. 68. 2), which is also the archetype of all manuscripts of Tacitus, *Annals* xii-xvi. It is, however, much damaged and has also often been so altered as to obliterate the original text. Editors therefore seek help in a copy of about A.D. 1200 ( $\phi$ ), written, like F, in the monastery of Monte Cassino, and like F now at Florence (Laur. 29. 2). Robertson was the first to undertake the systematic examination of later manuscripts: he was able to show that of four classes into which they fell, one class, and one only, ultimately derived from F before it had suffered damage or alteration; manuscripts of this class (I) could therefore be used to supplement gaps in F and to provide an editor with information about the *traditio* where the original reading had been altered. The amount of work involved was formidable. Between 1910 and 1911 Robertson made partial collations of thirty-six later manuscripts, twenty-five of which he had under his hands; at the same period, and again in 1921, he also worked with F and  $\phi$  in Florence. A sentence, which hints a characteristic pleasure



in his own possessions, is indicative of the meticulous methods he applied: 'I have repeatedly measured all F's gaps with a small ivory ruler marked in millimetres; and I have found elsewhere in F, and measured with the same ruler, all the combinations of letters found in  $\phi$ 's *supplementa*. The results made it obvious that Helm had not done the same: in almost every case the supplements fitted the space with the minutest exactitude.' Robertson's conclusions having been published in a long article in 1925, he was asked to undertake the editing of the *Metamorphoses* for the Budé series, in collaboration with Paul Vallette, Professor at Strasbourg and later at the Sorbonne, who had been responsible for the same author's *Apologia* and *Florida*. Vallette contributed the notes and general introduction as well as the translation, while Robertson prepared an account of the manuscripts, the text, and the apparatus criticus. But the two scholars discussed one another's contributions, working in harmonious liking and respect. The first two volumes appeared in 1940, the third in 1945. Neither year was one in which works of classical scholarship were widely reviewed, but such notices as appeared were uniformly laudatory. Not only had Robertson for the first time fully adduced the evidence of Class I of the later manuscripts, he had also greatly improved the record of F and  $\phi$ . He introduces into the text some fifty-five of his own conjectures; many certain and all of high quality; while of thirty-five more in the apparatus many call attention to unnoticed difficulties. The apparatus itself, described by Marouzeau as 'le type d'apparat raisonné, le seul qui convienne à une édition vraiment scientifique', concisely gives the reasons, where it is possible to do so, for preferring one reading to another. For example, at I. 22. 6, where it is necessary to decide between *accumbentem* and *accubantem*, Apuleius's usage of the two verbs is analysed. At the same time he gave an example of how to omit what a critic does not need to know. In a tradition like that of Apuleius it is only necessary, where later manuscripts are concerned, to know whether a reading reproduces the original text of the archetype or is an emendation or error. To enumerate the manuscripts in which it is found is not relevant to the constitution of the text, and makes an apparatus less immediately intelligible. Robertson lightened his apparatus by using a single sign to indicate any reading of any manuscript (with what he confessed was the illogical exception of the famous  $\phi$ ), which was to be regarded as not reproducing that of F, and other signs to indicate the agreement of a majority of his

Class I manuscripts. This left space for the fruit of much work in the recording of conjectures, with attention to priority; brief reasons for favouring or rejecting many of them make this much more than a mere compilation.

Numerous dated collections of notes show that Robertson continued to work on Pindar not only during his tenure of the professorship but also after his retirement. Originally he contemplated a complete edition, but later he decided that this was too large a task and that he would limit himself to editing the *Pythians*. That in the end he disappointed the hopes aroused by his long-standing and publicly expressed desire 'to advance the knowledge of Pindar' is in part to be put down to the illnesses that handicapped him. But the fundamental reason seems to be that he had lost interest in a project not fully suited to his gifts and nature. Pindar, who had already attracted him when he was a boy at Westminster, could not maintain that attraction through a lifetime. As in personal relations Robertson was a man who needed to make new friends, so in literature he needed the stimulus of new authors. What he enjoyed, and what he was particularly able to communicate, was the immediate response to the work of art; he enjoyed, too, the solving of a problem that aroused his interest and was limited enough to retain it. To write a full commentary on an author, such as would have satisfied his standards, requires long concentration and the settling of innumerable trivial but often difficult and complex questions. In his work on Apuleius he had shown that he could do this kind of thing, but it was not altogether congenial, and with waning personal ambition he found it easy to follow more alluring paths. Someone has said that he was by nature not a scholar but a polymath, and there is truth in this, if it is remembered that he knew what scholarship is, and would not publish what fell short of the standards he recognized. Those called, among other things, for a knowledge of what had been written previously on the subject, and the greater part of what he left on Pindar is, in fact, bibliographical and the record of the views of others. Some of his more general opinions about the poet were collected in three lectures delivered at University College, London, in 1950, but it cannot at present be said whether these could properly be adapted for publication.

Robertson's writing on Greek literature, therefore, is confined to his articles. These, although mostly brief, show the wide range of his reading in Latin as well as in Greek authors, the alertness of mind that discovered previously unsuspected

problems, and the ability to attack old puzzles without preconceptions. Among those of a more general interest may be mentioned the papers on the legend of Phrixus and on the date of the *Pervigilium Veneris*, a disputed matter which he appears to have settled, and the attribution to Menander of a striking speech by a young wife against an attempt to detach her from a husband who is in trouble; this, though long known, had fallen into disregard since Wilamowitz had dismissed it as a miserable travesty of Euripides, to whom it is ascribed by the papyrus which preserves it. Few now agree with Robertson that it is in fact a lost part of the *Epitrepontes*, but this somewhat startling claim at least ensured attention for it, and its printing in subsequent editions of Menander. The many notes on textual problems show resourcefulness; he was not one of those critics who have a panacea for corruption. In general, these short articles may stand as models of literary sensibility, sense of proportion, elegance, and urbanity.

Robertson's direct personal influence, exerted in the lecture-room or privately, had as much importance as his writing. His first public lectures were on architecture, and were continued until the appearance of his *Handbook*, but after his return from the war he developed courses on literary subjects, almost entirely in the field of Greek poetry, although from time to time he would lecture on some of Demosthenes' *Private Orations*. Otherwise his favourite topics were Pindar, Aeschylus, and the history of Greek poetry from Homer to early tragedy. As professor he would usually lecture in one term on a set subject for Group A of Part II of the Tripos: in three years this subject was Comedy, for which he retained a youthful zest, but more often it was a book for textual criticism. He enjoyed lecturing, and put a lot of work into preparation of his lectures. He tended to pack in more material than the hearer could assimilate, but his audiences savoured the polish of his phrasing, recognized his familiarity with modern scholarship, and were stimulated to open their eyes. At a more advanced level, he was generous of time and effort in discussing the work of younger scholars. One of them recalls how he sent him, while on holiday, a paper on the *Hercules Furens* of Euripides, incidentally one of the few plays of that author for which he cared, and even that with growing reservations. It came back in a few days with copious notes and an explanation that he had read, first the play, then the paper, then the play again, and finally the paper again. To take such trouble was to him the most natural thing in the world.

Closely associated with this readiness to help others was a strong sense of public spirit, that led him to accept service on many committees, among which may be mentioned the Council of the Senate at Cambridge (1928-32), the Fitzwilliam Syndicate, the Managing Committee of the British School at Athens (1923-51), the Classical Journals Board, of which he was Chairman from 1933 to 1946, and the Council of the British Academy (1944-6). He was a valuable member of a committee for his quick grasp of the points at issue and the generosity of temper that would make him detect and denounce any kind of unfairness in a course proposed. He also served his college as Vice-Master from 1947 to 1951, an office that he found congenial; his ready interest in strangers and the geniality of his conversation made him admirably fitted to preside at the High Table and in the Combination Room, where his talk profited by a well-stored memory, particularly retentive of the piquant and the picturesque.

Robertson was among the most attractive personalities of his generation at Cambridge. A well-built man, with large features that many found handsome, he was so many-sided in his interests that in most companies he could display his quickness of mind and range of knowledge. He was swift, sometimes even excitable, in his intellectual and emotional responses, and endowed with a flashing wit. This swiftness passed into impulsiveness of speech and action, which was part of his charm. He showed his dislikes almost as clearly as his likes, and was not ashamed if they were irrational. There were some people whom he could not bear, and if he were forced to listen to them, growing nausea would reveal itself in his face, until in extremity he would bury it in his hands. He may have been unaware of the transparency of his feelings, but in some cases he was aware of their cause: he could not endure pretentiousness or the exploitation of emotion, especially if he thought it simulated. So long as they were not bores or repulsive to him, he was spontaneously interested in other people's doings and thoughts, but with something of a child's immediate delight in what is new. He lacked imagination to understand in others what they did not display or he know from his own experience. Thus though he was generous in giving, his criterion of a gift was that it should be an object that gave him pleasure, for its beauty, its rarity, or its associations. Yet a friend whom he saw to be in trouble would be approached with warm sympathy and delicacy of feeling. His native love of the visual arts meant

much to him, but he could tolerate the presence of nondescript things, having a power of disregarding much that others would find an annoyance, and concentrating his attention on what he valued. This power was notably exemplified when he was ill. To be in bed, although it might be resented, could be made an opportunity for undisturbed serious reading. Once when feeling really unwell, he said he must have some light literature; asked to suggest something, he replied 'The *Mabinogion* and *King Lear*'. Although his reading included much biography, memoirs, and books of travel, it was in imaginative literature and especially in poetry that he found his greatest joy. In French he was an admirer of Balzac, in Italian he had read all Ariosto as well as Leopardi and Dante, to whom he constantly returned. He had a series of small notebooks, in which he had copied out favourite passages from these, as from Greek, Icelandic, Persian, and above all English authors; each day one was carried, in a silk case, in a pocket of his coat, to be read in trains or when the business of a meeting grew tedious. He would in fact always rather read than reflect. The fruits of this reading enriched his conversation, and he thereby provided a living example of the pleasures of literature, to which all the efforts of commentators, although not without value in themselves, must in the end be subordinate.

F. H. SANDBACH

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