



CLEMENT G. J. WEBB

Photograph by Sevine

CLEMENT CHARLES JULIAN WEBB

1865-1954

CLEMENT CHARLES JULIAN WEBB was born in London on the 25th of June 1865, son of the Rev. Benjamin Webb and Maria Elphinstone *née* Mill. Benjamin Webb had, as an undergraduate at Cambridge, founded, with John Mason Neale, the Cambridge Camden Society (afterwards transferred to London), which played a large part in the revival of interest in Church history, ritual, and music consequent on the Tractarian movement; he had later been, on Gladstone's recommendation, appointed to the important living of St. Andrews, Wells Street, in Marylebone. His interests were not confined to the subjects just mentioned; round his church were grouped a great variety of organizations, including the first day-nursery to be established in London. Clement Webb's mother was a daughter of William Hodge Mill, a learned Arabic, Sanskrit, and Hebrew scholar, who after several years spent in India had been appointed Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge. Mill's wife was on her mother's side of Indian blood, but had been brought up in Edinburgh, and had, as she said, never doubted that the anonymous author of the early Waverley novels was Walter Scott; she 'could hear in them the voice of the man who had told her stories as she sat upon his knee'.

In 1942 Webb began an autobiographical sketch upon which, by the kindness of his literary executor, Mr. J. D. Carleton, Master of the Queen's Scholars at Westminster, I have been enabled to draw, for part of what I have to record about his early life. It is a matter of some interest to note that in it he records, as the earliest example of 'the habit of reflection which was to turn me at last into a professional philosopher', that one day, when he was five years old, he was all at once forcibly struck by the question what do I 'I—mean by "I"?' In the same year he met in his father's household Gounod, then a refugee from France during the Franco-Prussian War. Webb seems not to have been at his best in this interview; for his father's comment on his behaviour—rather severe, administered as it was to a child of five—was 'an oaf has met a genius'. Webb was, apparently, an untidy child. 'I have always', he says, 'suspected that a bad fairy laid upon me in my cradle a curse which all my life

through has disabled me from confining within its legitimate limits the ink I have used in pursuing my studies.' This was one manifestation of a wider disability which he labels as unhandiness. 'Not only', he says, 'have I no instinctive perception of the way in which material things should be handled, but I have never felt curiosity or interest about their workings, and in this mechanical age, when quite young children seem to be endowed almost from their cradles with a knowledge of motor cars and aeroplanes which is marvellous in the eyes of my generation, I must appear little better than a primitive savage in my profound ignorance and stupidity when confronted with what, according to the philosophy of Henri Bergson, is the connatural object of the human intellect, the demands whereof have determined the history of its evolution'; and he adds as an illustration of this the remark of a fellow schoolboy, 'I *hate* Clement Webb, he can't sharpen a pencil.' Some of the most interesting passages in his account of his early years relate to links with the past, of which I have already mentioned two. He recalls that while he was a schoolboy he met a lady who had in 1812, as a member of a British family interned in France, seen Napoleon arrive at Givet on the Meuse, in a bad temper because no proper crossing of the river had been provided for him, but had later observed him 'sitting on a table throwing sugar-plums into the air and catching them in his mouth'. She was, Webb reflects, probably the last survivor in our nation of those who had set eyes on Napoleon in the days of his glory. Others of his early recollections were those of meeting Sir Henry Taylor, who had been the friend of Wordsworth and Southey, and the painter George Richmond, who had in his youth sat at the feet of Blake.

In due time Webb became a 'half-boarder', and later a Queen's Scholar, of Westminster, and he records that, devoted as he afterwards became to his three colleges, Christ Church, Magdalen, and Oriel, his warmest attachment of all was to Westminster, where 'the intense enjoyment of a close and intimate companionship with my schoolfellows was consecrated and dignified by the overshadowing presence of the great Abbey, the august shrine of our national history'. It was there that he made the acquaintance of Charles Shebbeare, who later went to Christ Church with him, and became perhaps the closest of all his many friends—for Webb had a genius for friendship, and for keeping his friendships alive. The boys of Westminster, '*imperii accolentes forum*', had the privilege of attending at meetings of Parliament and at trials in the courts,

which were still held in Westminster Hall; and Webb used the privilege freely.

In 1884 he came up as a Westminster Scholar to Christ Church. He was not very much interested in pure classics, and took only a second class in Moderations. When he proceeded to the Greats course, his first teacher in philosophy was J. A. Stewart, known to his pupils as the *Megalopsuchos*; but after a year he came under the teaching of John Cook Wilson, who was about to succeed T. H. Green as the most dominant influence in Oxford philosophy. Him Webb always described as having influenced his thought more than any other of his teachers.

After getting his First Class in Greats, Webb tried for two fellowships, one at New College and one at Merton. Both attempts were unsuccessful, but it was no disgrace to be beaten by Gilbert Murray and John Burnet. In his third attempt, at Magdalen, he was successful, and thus began a close association that was to last for thirty-three years. At first there was no teaching available for him at Magdalen, and he took part of the philosophical work at New College, where he had as pupils, among others, the poet Lionel Johnson, and at least two who were to become Fellows of the British Academy, Basil Williams and Horace Joseph. After a year, work became available for him at Magdalen; to him were assigned half of the teaching of philosophy, and the teaching of logic to passmen, which he evidently enjoyed as much as the other part of his work. It is characteristic of his courtesy, that observing on one occasion a negro in his audience, he hastily abandoned the conventional examples of the particular proposition, 'Some men are white', 'Some men are not white'.

The description of his early years at Magdalen forms the most racy part of his unfinished autobiography. The college at that time abounded in men who, having won fellowships which were vacated only by marriage, death, or disgraceful behaviour, proceeded, some to highly unacademic lives (one became a mounted policeman in Australia), others to somewhat eccentric modes of life within the college. The tales which Webb relates of these men should certainly not be lost to posterity. At this point, too, we come across another of those links with the past to which I have already referred. The senior fellow when Webb was admitted to the society was John Fisher, who had been a contemporary of Gladstone at Eton, and a Fellow of Magdalen for eighteen years under a President (Routh) 'who remembered Oxford still girt by its medieval walls and towers, had himself seen Dr.

Johnson in the High Street, and had conversed with a lady whose recollections of the university city included one of Charles II walking with his dogs in the Parks and dodging the efforts of the Heads of Houses to seize the opportunity of contact with their sovereign'. Besides these very senior fellows, however, Magdalen had many younger men of great distinction, and with all, seniors and juniors alike, Webb lived in great amity, having as his closest friends H. A. Wilson, Cuthbert Turner, and Paul Benecke.

From 1907 to 1920 he was also tutor in philosophy to the non-collegiate students. The life of a Greats tutor was a very arduous one. Many hours of every week were occupied with lecturing or with individual tuition. In addition a tutor was expected to examine in Greats when called upon to do so, and, with some hundred and fifty candidates to examine, that meant two months of gruelling work. This task Webb discharged from 1906 to 1909. It is no wonder that in his earliest years of tutorial work Webb published nothing but reviews; he certainly made up for this by writing a great deal later. He was closely attached to his pupils and with many of them formed ties of friendship which he maintained throughout his long life. He occasionally took reading parties in the long vacation, but in almost every year from 1887 to the beginning of the First World War he spent much of the long vacation on the Continent. These visits were renewed when the war was over, and in 1924 he heard Mussolini make a speech 'in a voice', he remarks, 'of wonderful beauty'.

My own knowledge of Webb began in 1900. It was chiefly in two societies that I met him, both of them societies which met once a week in term time. One was the Oxford Aristotelian Society, which met first in the rooms of Ingram Bywater, Professor of Greek, and in other rooms after Bywater left Oxford, until it was killed by the First World War, or rather scotched, only to be revived in 1954. This society of a little more than a dozen members worked its way steadily through major works of Aristotle, with an occasional divagation to Plato or Theophrastus. Webb was an excellent Aristotelian scholar; I remember with gratitude the help which I received from him in attempting to elucidate the theology of the *Metaphysics*.

The other society, a society without a name, had about the same number of members, and to a large extent the same members, but concerned itself with current problems of philosophy. It had a longer life; it took the Second World War to kill it. It was more controversial in character. In the early years of

this century the idealism of Green, Bradley, and Bosanquet (if one may connect under one name thinkers who in many respects were so different) was still strongly supported but had begun to be on the wane, and the strongest influence, both in the society and in Oxford generally, was that of Cook Wilson, who in theory of knowledge had been converted from idealism to realism. Both sides were represented in the society: Joachim was the strongest supporter of idealism, Cook Wilson, Joseph, and Prichard the strongest supporters of realism. In ethics the debate was, in the main, between the revised utilitarianism of Rashdall and the intuitionism of Joseph and Prichard. In theory of knowledge Webb was a realist, but he never took a very active part in controversy; what I remember best is the beautiful modesty and courtesy with which he always expressed himself. He was also a member of the Synthetic Society, whose interests were in the ground common to philosophy and theology, and which included several men important in the national life; but of this society I cannot speak from personal knowledge.

In 1905 Webb married Eleanor Theodora Joseph, daughter of Alexander Joseph (honorary canon of Rochester), and sister of Webb's former pupil and great friend Horace Joseph. Their marriage, which was terminated by her death in 1942, was, though they had no children, a very happy one; Mrs. Webb was a most cultivated woman, who shared to the full his interest in theology. They were constant in their hospitality, first in a house picturesquely situated near Magdalen, on the River Cherwell, and later in a house in Old Marston, near Oxford.

Webb's first publication, a translation of the *Devotions* of St. Anselm, was published in 1908. This was followed in 1909 by a massive edition of the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury, the greatest English scholar of the twelfth century, manuscripts of whose work Webb had studied in several continental libraries, as well as in English libraries. Every page of John's work is full of allusions, often very recondite, which require annotation, and Webb spared no pains in tracing the source of every allusion. His edition is indeed a work of remarkable learning, and forms, with his later edition of the same author's *Metalogicon*, his greatest contribution to scholarship, and one (I am told) still very highly esteemed by students of the Middle Ages.

Shortly after the publication of this book Webb was appointed by the university to deliver lectures on the philosophy of religion, and these appeared under the title *Problems in the Relation of God*

and Man (1911). These lectures, his first philosophical publication, dealt with three antitheses: those of reason and revelation, of nature and grace, and of man and God. They were eminently clear and persuasive studies in natural theology. Like most of his works, they attract as much by the charm of the personality that lies behind them as by the force of the argument. It was no doubt these lectures that led to his appointment in 1911 as Wilde Lecturer in Natural and Comparative Religion. Some of the lectures given by him in this capacity formed the basis for his next major work, *Studies in the History of Natural Theology* (1915). The authors studied in this book were Plato, a series of medieval theologians—St. Anselm, Abelard, St. Thomas Aquinas, Raymond of Sebonde—and two thinkers of the sixteenth century, Pomponazzi and Lord Herbert of Cherbury. In the same year he published the *History of Philosophy* in the Home University Library.

In his next book, *Group Theories of Religion and the Individual* (1916), Webb turned from the study of medieval theology to the study of the theories about religion which had been recently advocated by the French scholars Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl, who had treated religion as essentially a social, not an individual phenomenon. This was perhaps a natural view for men who viewed religion (if one may venture to say so) from the outside, but it was not likely to appeal to one who was religious through and through, and Webb had little difficulty in showing that while it might be true of religion in its earliest and lowest forms, it was certainly not true of religion in its higher manifestations.

In 1917 Webb was appointed Gifford Lecturer in the University of Aberdeen, and his lectures were published under the titles *God and Personality* (1918) and *Divine Personality and Human Life* (1920). These were, apart from two exceptions which will be mentioned later, his last major works, and it may be well to write rather more in detail about them. The themes of personality and individuality were much in the air at that time. Royce, Driesch, and Bosanquet had all recently delivered Gifford Lectures dealing with these subjects, and Webb's aim was 'to arrive at some conclusion as to the rights and wrongs of the controversy between those who ascribe and those who refuse to ascribe Personality to God'. He began with a careful inquiry into the meanings and associations of the various terms which have from time to time been used in connexion with the nature of personality—*ὑπόστασις*, *οὐσία*, *πρόσωπον*, *substantia*, *persona*—and of the word 'person' itself. From an account of the history

of the notion of personality as applied to God, he passed to consider the relations between personality and individuality, and between personality and rationality. He then turned to consider three recent attempts at a doctrine of a finite God, and offered reasons for rejecting them. After discussing the problem of creation and the problem of sin, and the relations between religion and philosophy, he passed to his own formulation of a doctrine of divine personality.

While the first series of Webb's Gifford Lectures was devoted to a study of the nature of God, the second was devoted to a study of the relations that can exist between such a God as the earlier lectures had depicted and such beings as we are, the most important of the spheres which he explored being, naturally, the moral life and the religious life; and from these he passed to a study of the value and the destiny of individual persons. The impression which these two books make is that of a mind very sensitive to the merits, and equally sensitive to the demerits, of views on these subjects current at that time, and feeling its way very cautiously to a view that would include what was true and reject what was false in these views.

In 1920 Webb was elected to the newly founded Oriel Professorship of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion, and in 1922 he resigned his fellowship at Magdalen and became a Fellow of Oriel. He became, I believe, as closely attached to his new college as he was to his two former ones, and no one could have wished for a better colleague than I found him to be throughout the years of his membership of our governing body, until in 1930 he reached the age of retirement of Oxford professors.

The first book Webb published after he became a professor was *A Century of Anglican Theology, and Other Lectures* (1923). It was a careful study of the factors, both in this country and on the continent of Europe, both in theological and in non-theological thought, which had moulded the theology of the period. From this he turned to a new subject, Kant's Philosophy of Religion. His book, published under this title in 1926, is a careful study of Kant's views about religion from his earliest writings to his *Opus Postumum*, which had been published by Adickes in 1920. In 1928 Webb returned to his study of English theology by writing a short book on *Religious Thought in the Oxford Movement*; and in 1929 he published a short book on *Pascal's Philosophy of Religion*. In the same year he returned to his old love, John of Salisbury, and published an annotated edition of the *Metalogicon*; and in

1932 he wrote a book giving a general account of that great medieval churchman. In 1930, when he had retired from his Oxford chair, Webb received an invitation, particularly welcome to him in view of his connexion with India, to deliver a series of lectures in the University of Calcutta, and these were published in 1932 under the title *The Contribution of Christianity to Ethics*. These lectures were addressed by a Christian to an audience mostly consisting of non-Christians, and are in their tone a model of what such lectures should be.

In his next book, published in 1933, *A Study of Religious Thought in England from 1850*, Webb returned to a subject he had dealt with before. He was still to write two more books—*Religion and Theism* (1934) and *The Historical Element in Religion* (1935), in which he continued his study of subjects he had dealt with earlier.

In 1944, on the instance of Dr. Grensted, his successor in the Oriel (now Nolloth) Chair, Webb delivered in the Hall of Oriel a lecture on religious experience. The lecture, a remarkable one for a man about to enter on his eightieth year, was printed, and the printed copy was presented to him on his eightieth birthday, accompanied by the names of 192 friends who wished to be associated with the gift. The number of persons distinguished in various walks of life who joined in this demonstration of respect and affection is only less remarkable than the number of the items (313 if my arithmetic is correct) included in the list of his published writings, which accompanied the printed lecture. It is true that many of these were reviews of books, or short articles on small points; but he devoted great care to the writing of reviews, and some of those who were reviewed by him have paid tribute to the fairness with which they were reviewed, and the original suggestions they received from the reviews.

When he ceased to be a professor, Webb went to live in the little village of Pitchcott, near Aylesbury. But he was constant in his visits to London, and to Oxford. He retained his keenness of mind to the end of his long life. Only a week or a fortnight before he died he wrote to me saying that he had been so much interested by Sir Edgar Adrian's address to the British Association that he had written a short note on it which he would like to see published in *Philosophy*; it has now duly appeared there.

Shortly afterwards he wrote to tell me he had resolved to undergo a serious operation. From this he did not recover, and he died on the 5th of October 1954.

Webb was for many years a member of the Hebdomadal

Council, and of the General Board of Studies, at Oxford, and of the Archbishops' Committee on Doctrine, which reported in 1938. He received honorary degrees from the universities of St. Andrews, Upsala, and Glasgow. He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1927, and was at his death (I believe) our oldest Fellow.

A word should be said about Webb's style in writing. His talk was simple and straightforward; in writing, he was master of a Henry-James-like style (though his model was probably Cicero rather than Henry James); his sentences frequently wound their way through many convolutions and parentheses, and often a happy quotation or allusion, to their triumphant conclusion.

He was a man of eminently friendly disposition; the autobiographical fragment to which I have referred shows clearly how numerous, lasting, and faithful his friendships were. He had a keen sense of humour, and was a good teller of a story. He had never played games, except (to a minimal extent) at school, and in fact positively disliked, without in the least despising, them; but he was a good walker, and kept up his four or five miles a day almost to the end of his long life.

W. D. Ross