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MARTIN PERCIVAL CHARLESWORTH

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1895–1950

MARTIN PERCIVAL CHARLESWORTH was born on 18 January 1895, the elder son of the Reverend Ambrose Charlesworth, at that time Curate of Eastham, Cheshire, and later Rector of Thursaston in the same county. He was educated at Birkenhead School and entered Jesus College, Cambridge, in the Michaelmas Term of 1914 as a Rustat Scholar. There he was taught by two sound Classics, E. Abbott and W. H. Duke, and was elected to University Scholarships—the Bell in his first year, the John Stewart of Rannoch in his second. Despite a defect in eyesight he obtained a commission in the Labour Corps and served at home and abroad, mostly in the Middle East, till the end of the First World War. On his return to Cambridge he quickly caught up with his studies, and in 1920 he won the Craven Scholarship and was placed in the First Division of the First Class in the Classical Tripos, Part I. In 1921 he was First Chancellor's Medallist. In Part II of the Tripos he took a First Class with distinction in Ancient History, which he had chosen as his special subject of study. His academical successes and his personality were duly recognized by his election to a Fellowship at Jesus in that year. In 1920 he had made his one appearance on the stage in the role of the Nurse in the notable production of the *Oresteia*. During the academical year 1921–2 he held a Visiting Fellowship at Princeton University, where he made lasting friendships and is still remembered with affection.

During his residence at Princeton Charlesworth took in hand his first piece of research, on the Trade Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire, which he pursued with characteristic energy on his return to Cambridge. His book on this topic was finished in time to be awarded the Hare Prize for 1922. This was a remarkable feat for so young a scholar in so short a time. It was written *con amore*, for as Charlesworth says in his Preface, 'I believe in the Roman Empire', a belief which inspired most of his later original work. Whereas the book was limited to the theme set out in its title and did not claim to do more than 'outline a part of the economic life of the Roman Empire during its first two centuries', it ranged beyond the frontiers of the Empire to India, Ceylon, and China. Some parts of the ground were rather slightly treated—it was observed that Germany and

parts of south-east Europe might have received more attention —but, on the whole, it was recognized as meeting a need of students and as of value to specialists. Within two years of its publication it was reprinted with some corrections, and in 1938 it was translated into French and in 1940 into Italian.

Even more important for Charlesworth's career than this earnest of his future distinction as an Ancient Historian was an appointment at St. John's. To quote the Master of that college, he 'was one of that quartet of distinguished men whom we were fortunate in bringing to the College from outside at the end of the First World War, when the numbers of our own body had been depleted by war and other causes, and who gave the College great service in those days of reconstruction and expansion—Coulton, Creed, Henry Howard, and Charlesworth himself. All threw themselves into the work of the College and became wholly identified with it. . . .' Even while he was at Princeton St. John's invited him to assist in the classical teaching of the college from the Michaelmas Term of 1922, and in March 1923 he was elected a Fellow and college Lecturer in Classics. While he retained his personal connexion with Jesus College and enjoyed the friendship of such members of that foundation as Foakes-Jackson, Quiller-Couch and, closest of all, Bernard Manning, he became a Johnian with a devotion to that college which was the strongest interest of his academical career. He proved himself an admirable teacher with a sympathetic understanding of his pupils. In 1925 he accepted a Tutorship, which he held for six years. He had much to do, and did it with easy efficiency in harmony with his colleagues. But, most of all, he gave himself to his men, to whom 'Charles', as they called him, was a constant and resourceful friend. His judgement of undergraduates was discriminating; his benevolence was universal. It is hard to believe that any Tutor can have enjoyed the trust of his pupils so fully or understood them better. In his rooms he was very hospitable, and he was an excellent host, talking away and getting others to talk, or at his piano enjoying himself and the cause of enjoyment to others.

In vacation he was apt to set off to the Roman Wall, taking undergraduates with him, and on the Wall he was soon the friend of all the world. He travelled abroad and made friends with scholars, in particular with the most eminent Rumanian historian of the day, V. Pârvan, whom he lured to Cambridge to give some notable lectures which he translated in collaboration with his close friend I. L. Evans.

During these years he found time for his own work, publishing papers which showed his critical judgement of the sources for the early Principate. He was appointed a University Lecturer in Classics and quickly won a high reputation. On the death of J. B. Bury he was appointed an Editor of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, which had then reached its sixth volume. He remained an Editor until the completion of the work a dozen years later, and only those who were closely in touch with its progress can realize how great is its debt to his loyal and skilful co-operation. Such an enterprise is apt to be beset with complications; amid these he preserved an equable mind and displayed great resource. Apart from his own contributions, which will be considered later, he took his full share in planning for future volumes and in the preparation of the volume in hand. He was not concerned to claim credit for such success as was achieved; but it was realized among scholars how increasingly his wide knowledge and rapidly maturing judgement were of advantage to their joint efforts, and his reputation as a leader among the younger Ancient Historians became established beyond dispute.

When in 1931 the University created a Laurence Readership in Classics for Ancient History, especially the History of the Roman Empire, Charlesworth was appointed to it, a post which he held with distinction until his death. Under the regulations for the Readership he relinquished the post of Tutor at St. John's, but continued to take an active part in the classical teaching of the college. This teaching in pure Classics at once kept his literary interests wide and contributed to his sure instinct in the interpretation of literary texts, which was one characteristic of his historical work. With his wide knowledge of undergraduates and of college affairs he continued to take his full share in its administration. He was by now well known throughout the University. In the varied society of St. John's, which contained many notable personalities, he had close friends, and he was fortunate in having for his more immediate colleagues T. R. Glover and E. E. Sikes; but he was, besides, very sociable, and a welcome guest at High Tables throughout the University.

Charlesworth enjoyed lecturing. In formal historical writing he possessed, besides high technical competence, a fluent, lucid style with considerable power of phrase, but it was in the art of the spoken word that he excelled. The matter of his lectures was meticulously prepared and sedulously revised in the light of new evidence or new ideas. In an advanced course he could handle documents with unhasting thoroughness. But his especial

skill was in a general treatment and interpretation illuminated by examples. In his light, rather mellifluous voice he would seem to be taking his audience into his confidence about matters in which they were as interested, and almost as informed, as himself. The difficult art of knowing how much knowledge he could assume in his class came easily to him. (He was plausibly alleged to have begun a Tripos lecture with the word 'But'.) He was, sparingly, witty without elaboration, indulging in a neat phrase or, more often, in a gay παρὰ προσδοκίαν—'Antony was a great leader of men, and a great follower of women.' In his very occasional broadcasts he was master of concise, easy exposition. When he addressed a learned society he was unobtrusively learned: to a less sophisticated audience he was simple and direct. He was one of those men who would be told: 'You do not know me, but I shall never forget listening to you ten years ago.'

Charlesworth's frequent excursions to the Roman Wall were not only for the pleasure of walking with his friends and to satisfy a love of the countryside: they sprang from a deep interest in the history of Roman Britain. He was not a specialist in archaeology, but he had a wide knowledge of its results, and a command of epigraphic evidence and of the numismatics of the Principate. He brought to their study a disciplined and, as it were, concrete imagination, and he added to it a quality which was most markedly his own and consonant with his personal character—a lively sympathy. The people of the Empire, in Rome, in Britain, or in other provinces, were to him alive. He was too shrewd to decline to vague sentiment, but he was too intelligent to be cynical. He was at times more ready than most scholars to give to historical figures, as to those around him, the benefit of the doubt. And the doubt most often sprang from an acute, vigorous, and fair-minded criticism of the ancient evidence in which he excelled. All this is visible in his writings. In 1935 he delivered the Martin Lectures at the University of Oberlin in Ohio, which were published under the title of *Five Men. Character Studies from the Roman Empire*. Whereas in the first four lectures he described, with much learning lightly borne and a seasoning of wit, real personages, Herod Agrippa, Musonius, Josephus, and Agricola; in the last—the Merchant—he presented a composite figure set against a composite background. It was more than a *jeu d'esprit* and contained much that illuminates the sources on which it drew. It was, as it were, the *Trade-routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire* come alive in an

imaginative creation. As one reads these lectures, one is struck by the range of his knowledge of ancient and modern literature. He was gifted with a most retentive memory and an associative faculty which made quotation come easily. Nothing, for example, could be more apt than the passage from Bossuet which precedes the lecture on Agricola. Few classical scholars would have known the passage, and fewer still would have detected its perfect relevance to his theme.

His knowledge of numismatic evidence and power of interpretation were displayed in a series of lectures and articles on the attitude of the Imperial Government to its subjects and the converse of this; above all, in his Raleigh Lecture on the Virtues of a Roman Emperor. His appreciation of the services of the Empire to the world of the Principate was perhaps at times a trifle over-optimistic, but it was not without discrimination. He detects, for instance, in the *Clementia* that was an official attribute of the Emperor an 'ominous ring'. 'In fact', he writes, '*Clementia* had become too much a despotic quality; the mercy of a conqueror towards those whose life he holds in his hands, the gracious act of an absolute monarch towards his subjects.' Too many historians have gone astray in their evaluation of propaganda, as though 'what I tell you three times' is false. Charlesworth realized that the imperial propaganda 'was a very sober and truthful propaganda, and it was not far removed from fact . . . not promises for a vague future, but a reminder of genuine achievement'. He then continues, 'It was eminently successful, but like many other things, its very success brought peril with it. If you ask wherein that peril lay, I should say that it lay—as time went on—in the increasing concentration of popular belief and emotion upon one human figure, upon the *Virtus* and *Providentia* of the Emperor.' To these writings, as to those on ruler-cult, students of these matters will always turn with profit for the balanced judgement and penetration which they display.

In the *Cambridge Ancient History* he wrote an epilogue on Carthage which showed his insight into the national character of a people that were the stepchildren of history. Then in the tenth volume appeared chapters written in collaboration with W. W. Tarn on the period from the Ides of March to the triumph of Octavian. To this collaboration he always looked back with especial pleasure. It can best be described in the words of his collaborator, written to me after Charlesworth's death:

I am very proud and touched that he should have remembered our collaboration over volume X. It was certainly a very happy time for

me; he was the nicest person to collaborate with that one could imagine, and though it was a quite new kind of collaboration I think we only disagreed once. I still remember that day vividly; it was one point only; I came down to Cambridge overnight with a 'neutral draft', breakfasted with him, and then for 3 hours we went over my draft word for word like 2 lawyers, till at last we had a text with which neither of us quite agreed but which we could both sign without violating our consciences too badly. Then (do you remember?) you came in to lunch, and Charlesworth drove us to Ely Cathedral and all talk ended and we sat watching the sun through the stained glass. Not many other men would have thought of Ely being what we needed or what *I* needed. I have always remembered that day as one of the high lights of my life —a golden day—and I am very glad he remembered it too.

In the other chapters that Charlesworth wrote in this volume, those on Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius, and in his treatment of the Flavian Emperors in Volume XI, he was at his best. The themes suited him, the more as military history, in which his interest was slight, was no part of his task. In particular his chapter on Tiberius was of outstanding merit. It deserved the praise awarded it by Professor Syme that it succeeded in being fair both to the Emperor and to Tacitus.

In history-writing about the Principate the trend in recent times has been away from the study of the literary sources and towards that of epigraphical and numismatic evidence. Source criticism had proved on the whole disappointing in positive results: a justifiable scepticism about the description of the Empire in terms of the personality of Emperors was assuming the character of an irreverent agnosticism about the literary tradition. Charlesworth, after a profound study of Tacitus, in particular, was able to apply a more fruitful criterion to the literary sources. And his equally thorough treatment of the non-literary evidence made of it an ally and not merely a rival. This gave to his chapters on the Principate a rare poise and balance. Had he written nothing but these contributions to the *Cambridge Ancient History*, his place among historians of the Roman Empire would be secure.

In the meantime he continued to be a leading figure in the life of his college, and in 1937, on the retirement of E. E. Sikes, he was elected President, an office which he held until his death, to the great advantage of the Society. It was a position which afforded scope for his hospitable gifts, for, like Sir Peter,

> None better knew the feast to sway,
> Or keep mirth's boat in better trim.

He was at once a good talker and a good listener, with wide

interests which he was always ready to make wider still. Senior and junior Fellows were united in their goodwill to him. St. John's had formed an *amicitia* with Balliol and he cherished it. 'We in Balliol', wrote the Dean of that college to the Master on Charlesworth's death, 'owe him much for the pains he took to make our alliance the happy and valued one it has become, and we feel we have lost a real friend of the College.' It was an especial joy to his old pupils to return and find him presiding at the High Table, well aware of their fortunes and extending a warm welcome which turned back the years to the hospitable moments they remembered in his rooms when they were undergraduates. Devoted to his social duties as President, he dined out less often, but the loss this was to his many friends in the colleges was compensated by the anticipation of his presence when they were invited to St. John's. In college affairs he remained deeply interested, though he was not one of those who can best be described as men of business. His general attitude towards University policy was a belief that it was fallibly benevolent, to be carefully scrutinized if it touched the concerns of his college. He was for some years a valued Syndic of the Press, and he was a wise counsellor on the Classical Board, of which he was Chairman during the transition from war to peace.

When term was over he would retire from Cambridge, though not for long periods, to Heswall in Cheshire, where his mother lived, and to the north. He represented St. John's on the Governing Body of Sedbergh and delighted to go there. Thence he would proceed to a farm near Penrith or to Longtown, just south of the Border, where he had made friends from the rector and the neighbouring gentry to the postman, in whose cottage he would gossip away at his ease. Then he would return to the orderly comfort of his college rooms. He remained a bachelor, but took an affectionate interest in the family life of his closer friends, to whose children he was an ever-youthful uncle by adoption. To his younger colleagues in college and in the University he showed an unobtrusive and unexacting benevolence. The close co-operation of the teachers in Ancient History was, in a very great measure, due to him, and he did as much as anyone to maintain a strong tradition of goodwill among the classical dons of the University.

As the war approached there was a suggestion that he should undertake some highly confidential Government work, but it proved that he was needed in Cambridge, the more as the Master of St. John's became Vice-Chancellor in October 1939,

so that his own responsibilities increased. But he was very valuable in assisting to select men for important services, and he had the confidence of the departments he helped in this way. He took general charge of the teaching of Ancient History in the University in the absence of several of his colleagues. This was for him a period full of activity. His own account may be quoted from one of his books:

> During those uncertain years of 1939–45 the tasks of a civilian, at once an academic and a clergyman, were numerous and sometimes surprising: to teach and lecture in Classics, to attend and sometimes preach at special services, to fire-watch, to travel about the country lecturing at schools, to address groups of soldiers, to guide parties of guests over the College, endeavouring the while to explain the apparent illogicality of the English University and College system—these were but a few of them.

In 1940, indeed, he had decided to seek ordination, thus following the example of his father. As the Master of St. John's has written:

> Though his intellectual interests did not appear to be theological, the bent of his nature was pastoral, and he thought the religious vocation would help him in his relations with younger men and also enable him to be of some use on this side of College life. Henceforward he frequently took some part in Chapel Services and in his vacations assisted his brother, the Reverend Lancelot Charlesworth, Vicar of Tilston, adding to the already wide range of his academic labours a form of work in which he found a new vocation. At the same time he made it quite clear that he desired no ecclesiastical preferment; he liked the larger range of service opened to him, but that service was to be given in his own way and time. His faith appeared simple and unquestioning; Christianity sufficed for the problems of living and the problem of life, and he loved the forms of its worship.

As he sought no ecclesiastical preferment, so he declined academical advancement which would take him from Cambridge. But he had many contacts with foreign scholars. One thing that gave him especial pleasure was to visit Sweden for a small conference of Classics at Lund, in 1947, where he made new friends. He kept up close relations with his confrères at Oxford, where he was always welcome, and at other British universities. He was ever ready to be helpful with other men's research and to encourage it. This activity reached its climax once a year at a brief informal gathering of Ancient Historians. At Market Harborough, Tring, or Bedford the clans would gather from far and wide for sociable shop, in which he took a

leading part. For he was interested in all sides of the subject: he pursued, indeed—to use a phrase from the Epilogue of his Martin Lecture—'the close and affectionate study of Graeco-Roman antiquity, in all its branches'. But Rome claimed his chief devotion, and in 1945 he was elected President of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies. For three years he gave the closest attention to its affairs, and, what was more, he travelled about devoting his learning and enthusiasm and power of popular exposition to the purposes which the Society existed to promote. His interest in Roman Britain, which had never flagged, became wider and at the same time more intense. When he was invited to deliver the Gregynog Lecture for 1948 in the University of Wales he chose as his subject 'The Lost Province or the Worth of Britain'. These lectures were the last book of his published in his lifetime. Its main purpose is to refute the notion that Britain meant little to Rome as anything but a basis of power, and that Rome meant little to Britain. The book is persuasive, lucid, and realistic, but it seems to lack something of the old *élan*, if not of the old charm.

Charlesworth hoped to write on a large scale a history of the Roman Empire from Augustus to Constantine. That work was never written, but before his death he completed for the Home University Library a smaller book with the title *The Roman Empire*. It has not yet appeared as these words are written, but Norman Baynes, who has seen an advanced copy, writes of it:

> This is not a narrative history: 'this book', as Charlesworth wrote, 'aims at describing something of the life and work, of the thought and conditions, that existed during the first three centuries of that great experiment in government which men term the Roman Empire.' The range of the book is wide, thus, e.g., Army and Navy; Work and Taxes; Education, Literature and Art; Trade and Travel; Religion, each has its chapter; general statements are made vivid and are impressed on the memory by concrete illustrations or by citations from a literary text, an inscription or a papyrus. In its balance and sanity of judgement, in its liveliness and its human interest the book is characteristic of its author: the years of thought which were given to its shaping have not been spent in vain.

He had already received the due recognition of his qualities. He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and of the Academy. The Universities of Bordeaux and of Wales had honoured him with their doctorates. It appeared that he was in the full tide of acknowledged eminence. But *dis aliter visum*.

The decade since the outbreak of war had been a time of

heavy unremitting strain, and Charlesworth had never spared himself. Early in 1949 his closest friends could detect that he needed a rest to make good the long drain on his vitality. It was arranged that he should be freed from all duties in the Lent Term of 1950 so that he might seek refreshment of body and of mind. He had proposed to use this time to visit West Africa, but at the end of the Michaelmas Term he was taken ill. His doctor diagnosed heart strain and prescribed rest and a rigorous diet. He changed his plans and went by sea to Cyprus, where he was welcomed and made free of its varied antiquities. It was not possible for him to be inert, or even to deny himself the satisfaction of his lively interest in antiquity or to forgo the pleasure of seeing the beauty of the island. When he returned he was only half-way to the full restoration of his health. But he had returned with his former enthusiasm claiming his activity. It seemed as if, even so, all would be well. But towards the end of the Long Vacation, while he was staying with friends at Leeds, he had a serious heart attack. He rallied under skilful treatment, and there were high hopes that, with time and quiet, his health might in the end be fully restored. His natural elasticity and optimism would assist this, and in his letters he spoke of his illness as no more than a temporary interruption of his active life. Then came a second attack, from which recovery was not possible. His courage and consideration for others did not fail him, and it is permissible to quote the words of one who saw him the day before his death and found him cheerful, as ever, interested not in himself but in the recent doings of his friends: 'I think that he knew that I knew that he really understood his plight quite well: it was characteristic that, in order to spare us all distress, he should have acted the part he did so triumphantly.' The end came rather suddenly on October 26.

To me, as to many, this meant the end of a long friendship. It is not possible for me to write of him and dissemble my *desiderium tam cari capitis*. During over twenty-five years community of interests with a partnership in an enterprise we both had much at heart and an easy personal relationship had deepened into an intimacy that seemed just a part of the order of things. How often would come the ring of the telephone, then 'Martin here', starting a lively discussion of some topics of the moment, and ending with an assignation at King's Front Lodge just before one o'clock. He would come swinging along down Trinity Street to carry me off to lunch together and then take a turn or sit in his Fellows' Garden or mine, while we talked

things out. He was very quick at making or taking a point, *tenax propositi* but if, for good reasons given, he changed his mind, he did so frankly and freely. He was always, as Mr. H. M. Last has said of him, 'serious but merry, charitable but with high standards'. In these talks I found in him a heartening sympathy, half veiled in quips and a kind of *lingua franca* of quotations from frivolous writers we both delighted in. I was not in his confidence on all sides of his life, but when he gave his confidence he gave it completely in return for equal confidence. And it is no doubt true that, in other matters, other close friends had that same trust in him and he in them. Herein he found happiness and made others happy.

Indeed, granted Charlesworth's distinction as a scholar and service to Ancient History in the comparatively short span of life allotted to him, it is his personality that will be most freshly remembered. He was intellectually sophisticated: a close study of his writings reveals a subtle evaluation of evidence only partly masked by an easy and fluent style in narrative and exposition. But what marked him out among men no less gifted in intellect was his gaiety and ease, the fusing together of his mind and spirit, his *vis vivida animi*. His deep integrity as a scholar and a Christian gentleman went with an almost boyish *insouciance* which was partly high spirits and partly the absence of pedantry, egotism and ambition. His gifts made success come easily, but it was not his aim. For he was not ambitious, though he highly appreciated the good opinion of his friends and enjoyed deserving it. Had he lived he could have achieved yet more, and contributed more to learning and the stock of goodness in the world. His untimely death is a loss to many men and causes and to the college for which he cared so deeply, but he had achieved much, and his memory mitigates the loss.

I am indebted to the recollections of many of Charlesworth's friends, especially Mr. E. A. Benians and Mr. J. S. Boys Smith; and to *The Eagle* for leave to quote from the memoir contributed to it by Mr. Benians.

F. E. Adcock

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