



*Photo by Universal Pictorial Press, London*

SIR CHARLES OMAN

1936

## SIR CHARLES OMAN

1860-1946

CHARLES WILLIAM CHADWICK OMAN was the son of Charles Philip Oman, a planter, and of Anne Chadwick, and was born, 12 January 1860, at Mozufferpore (in the then North-western Provinces of India). Brought back to England and after a short time at a preparatory school, he was, in 1872, first in the list of scholars elected on the foundation at the College, Winchester. As he sets out in his *Memories of Victorian Oxford* (which is really his autobiography down to 1914 and which, on its publication in 1941, found many readers, involving three or four reprints of the first issue) his time at Winchester was anything but happy, owing to bullying, the fagging system, and poor feeding, and also to his complete difference from the normal public-school boy. The young Oman disliked all games, for which he had no aptitude—a dislike continued through his long life—and beyond walking his tastes were peculiar and not shared by his seniors or juniors in college. For he was beginning to develop the wide range of interests, so marked later, e.g. history of all periods, architecture, coins, and archaeology, outside the then narrow range of the school curriculum. But, though apparently throughout a long life he remembered only with dislike his time at Winchester, he became and remained to the end a loyal and enthusiastic Wykehamist, and sent his only son as a matter of course to the college. No other public school was worth considering.

In 1878 he was senior scholar from Winchester at New College, and obtained in 1882 a First Class in *Literae Humaniores* and in 1883 a First Class in Modern History. He hoped to obtain a New College Fellowship and maintains in *The Memories* that the fellowship which ought to have been his was deliberately diverted to mathematics—an interpretation deeply resented by the college both at the time and later when in 1941 he put it into print. Oman in fact seems to have completely misunderstood the position. In 1883 he now stood for All Souls and was elected in the November of 1883, along with the Hon. G. N. (later the Marquess) Curzon, from a large and strong field of candidates. Next year, in 1884, he obtained the Lothian Prize. The election of 1883 settled Oman's academic life and career, and from that date until the spring of 1946 he remained, in one

category or another, a Fellow of All Souls until his resignation of the Chichele Chair. It was his justifiably proud boast that from November 1883 to January 1946 he never failed to 'keep' all his academic terms or missed an important college meeting either in term or vacation—probably a unique record.

Oman at once settled down to be a don and an historian—a life thoroughly congenial to all his ambitions and tastes—and despite the episode of the fellowship readily accepted, while residing in All Souls, a lectureship at New College, in which he lectured and taught both Ancient and Modern History; and he was, I think, the only member of the University in his day who examined both for 'Greats' and the Honour School of Modern History, a clear proof of the range of his studies and the recognition by those concerned of his qualifications as a scholar. In 1891 he had succeeded J. A. Doyle as Librarian of the Codrington Library in the college, an office which he retained until his death and to the service of which he gave unstinted devotion: and in 1894–5 he was proctor for the college, with G. E. Underhill of Magdalen as his colleague, an office which, on the whole, he enjoyed, though his chief difficulty in discharging the varied duties was the necessity of strict punctuality for the major engagements.

In 1892 he had moved out of All Souls on his marriage to Mary, daughter of General R. Maclagan, R.E., and niece of the then Archbishop of York, Dr. Maclagan: so that there began in that year as happy a married life as the friends of either could have wished. Let it be briefly stated here that Mary Oman shared all her husband's tastes, assisted him in every way in every department of his activities, made his home (first in St. Giles and then at Frewin Hall, where the Omans succeeded Dr. Shadwell when he became Provost of Oriel) a centre of hospitality, and was the happy mother of three children, a son and two daughters. Amongst her many services the indexes (often full and always accurate) to all Oman's books were certainly her work. But the legend is not true that some of Oman's books owed their existence to Mrs. Oman's collecting, sorting, and pasting into a unified narrative the backs of envelopes or discarded half-sheets used by her husband at railway junctions where he had missed his train!

Oman was always ready to admit that he was not an effective speaker, either as a lecturer or at Congregation or in a college meeting; though as a lecturer the subject-matter was always first rate in quality, the delivery was not equal to it, and he

found it difficult, if not impossible, to compare the range and detail of his own knowledge with the probable ignorance of his audience. His pupils both in ancient and modern history got much more from him in their weekly or bi-weekly 'Essay Hours' than in the lecture room and there gradually grew up round him a series of legends, handed on with appropriate embellishments, based on the universality and range of his knowledge and his notorious difficulty in being punctual. One of these pupils, who subsequently achieved no small distinction as a scholar, found in his tutor's room at All Souls reading a small volume, replied to Oman's commendation of the habit of always having something worth studying in your pocket, 'Yes, I have read four books of Thucydides, waiting for you this term!'

In 1905 he was appointed to succeed Montagu Burrows as Chichele Professor of Modern History, an appointment which delighted him, for the Chair carried with it an official fellowship in All Souls, and thereby enabled him to continue his full membership and life in the college. It had not been an easy matter for the electors, as there was a formidable rival candidate in C. H. Firth (subsequently Regius Professor as successor to York Powell), but the decision, made by a majority of only one vote (as was the rumour of the day) or otherwise, pleased the college as much as it did Oman himself. And in this year, 1905, the new professor was also elected to a fellowship in the British Academy. A new phase of his life then began.

Oman for the next forty years discharged the statutory duties of his professorship as regards residence and lecturing with un-failing regularity, and though he travelled widely on the Continent in the vacations, he was always in Oxford for term, while his fine health enabled him to work as hard as he pleased; and hard work probably meant eight to ten hours in the day. He had two strong convictions—first it was the duty of a professor to 'produce' books and thereby set an example: secondly, he had no belief in the organization of post-graduate advanced work by seminars and the like as either a professorial obligation or as likely to be really effective. He told me more than once that he had read too many German Ph.D. theses to believe in the value of such methods. If, as was his own case, a young graduate had it in him to write, he would write, without artificial stimulation and would acquire the necessary technique by doing so, and on two public occasions he expressed his great regret that Lord Acton had really failed as an historian because he had subordinated the acquisition of knowledge to the writing of history.

Great learning that perished with the owner of it was really exasperating and useless. And Oman had in both York Powell and Acton two outstanding examples to illustrate his conviction, and he could point to his life-long friend and fellow Wykehamist, Haverfield, as a signal proof of his principle. As the list at the end of this article proves Oman certainly acted up to his creed, and while he did not form a seminar he was always available to any young graduate, to lend books from his growing library, suggest subjects for work, and to encourage in every way he could contributions to historical knowledge or research. His personal influence was, therefore, far more influential than any official organization as a professor.

As he explains with genial frankness in his *Memories* he was both in national and academic politics a stout and unrepentant Conservative, always ready to vote *non-placet* in Congregation. He accepted defeat with smiling serenity, and as his advocacy or opposition had nothing personal in their consistency, he was quite popular with his opponents, against whom he bore no resentment. It gave him unqualified satisfaction when in 1919 he was elected, as a Conservative, to be one of the Burgesses representing the University in Parliament, and he carefully arranged his time-table so that attendance at Westminster did not interfere with his duties as a professor; and the award of a K.B.E. in 1920 was hailed in every quarter as a fitting recognition of his position both in and outside Oxford, including much valuable and confidential work in the War Office between 1914 and 1918.

Oman remained a Burgess until 1935 when he retired. He was not an effective speaker though he greatly enjoyed voting for all the things he liked and against all (and they were many) that he disliked, and his votes probably expressed the views of the Conservative electors who had sent him to Westminster. On one notable occasion he held the House enthralled for forty minutes on a question of coinage when he discoursed with unrivalled knowledge on English coins from the Norman Conquest to King George V, illustrating his points by one coin after another drawn from a capacious trouser pocket. In that year, 1935, he would have probably been well advised on the creation of a university superannuation scheme to have accepted the proposal to resign his chair and retire on a university pension; but, along with a few other professors with vested interests, he declined, preferring to continue with no prospect of a pension. He valued immensely his position as Chichele Professor and

almost certainly underestimated the length of years he would attain. As it was he continued to discharge his statutory duties, though with every year the attendance at his lectures steadily diminished, and the cleavage between himself and the younger members of the History Faculty slowly widened. His views and theirs as to a professor's obligations were in irreconcilable opposition, but that there was nothing personal in the issue was shown in January 1940 when an address on his eightieth birthday, signed by all his colleagues in All Souls and by most members, old and young, of the History Faculty, was presented to him in the hall of the college, to which he replied in one of his most delightful speeches, recalling a number of 'odd' happenings (mostly 'revolutions' on which in his travels he had accidentally stumbled) in the course of a long life.

By December 1945 it became clear that he could no longer discharge his statutory duties, and it was arranged that he should retire with a pension from the University to be supplemented by a grant from All Souls. It was a great wrench for Oman, but no sooner had his resignation been accepted (May 1946) than a steady physical deterioration set in; yet such was his vitality that it was not until 24 June that the end came and, by his expressed wish, the funeral and memorial service were held, not in the University Church, but in the college chapel on 27 June.

A review of Oman as an historian reveals three points very distinctly: the unflagging continuity in production, the wide range of his interests and knowledge, and the quality of the contribution. His first book, a one-volume *History of Greece* (1888), was for many years the leading text-book, and his last, *The Lyons Mail* (1945), was a critical and most readable study of a notorious episode in French history. He had completed by the summer of 1945 an elaborate study of 'The Hundreds' in English history from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, but as it requires many maps as well as much paper for the text its publication by the University Press is delayed until circumstances permit. Unquestionably his major work is *A History of the Peninsular War* (i.e. from 1807 to 1814), the first volume of which appeared in 1902 and the seventh and last in 1930. It may have been somewhat daring to tackle the theme of Napier's classic masterpiece, completed in 1840, but since Napier's day much material, not available between 1828 and 1840, had become known or awaited investigation. Oman mastered these new and copious sources (the famous Vaughan papers in the Codrington Library being a notable example), and by repeated visits to

Portugal and Spain became thoroughly familiar with all the ground on which the War (and not merely the operations of the British Army) was fought. Professional critics, who from time to time challenged or resented a 'layman's' intervention into military matters, found in him a formidable opponent, for Oman not only knew far more than they did of the complicated political and military background, but ever since 1884 when he became a prominent member of the 'Kriegspiel' Club in Oxford had acquired a knowledge of military science and art over many centuries: and he had a most disconcerting way of refuting his professional critics by quoting against them the judgements both of Napoleon and Wellington, whose authority could not be contested. Had he done nothing else than produce his seven volumes on *A History of the Peninsular War* he would have an unquestioned leading place amongst British historians, for the work will never have to be done over again. But as the list of his books shows, he had done much else of lasting value from Roman History (*Seven Roman Statesmen* (1902) is still used) to books on *England before the Norman Conquest*, on the fifteenth century, on *The Art of War*, on *Castles*, and on *The Coinage of England*. *The Art of War* was a remarkable contribution to knowledge and so high an authority as Delbrück told me in Berlin that he had learned much from it.

The range of his knowledge and interests is most conclusively shown in the offices that he held: e.g. he was President of the Royal Historical Society from 1917 to 1921, Creighton Lecturer in 1922, President of the Royal Numismatic Society from 1919 to 1930, President of the Royal Archaeological Society from 1927 to 1937, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, an honorary or corresponding member of half a dozen foreign academies, and to all the societies with which he was officially connected he contributed addresses or papers on a remarkable variety of topics.

In one department of history—philosophy, thought, and ideas—he had no interest at all. After acquiring a sufficient knowledge of Plato and Aristotle to qualify for his First Class in 1882 he dropped the subject, and I can well remember his remark to myself, that having 'read Hobbes' for the Honour School of Modern History he saw no reason for ever opening his or any other philosopher's books again, being quite content to leave 'philosophy' to those who professed to understand it, which he did not. It was a regrettable gap in the wide sphere of his studies, but it was deliberate and unrepented to the end. But let it be said, also, that only those who have gone over the ground

that Oman covered or examined the original sources on which he worked can appreciate the amount of labour that lies behind the printed page, for Oman's gift of narrative is deceptive. It tends by its ease and lucidity to conceal the solid foundations on which the results rest. His judgement, like that of most historians, may be contested in this case or that, but Oman always wanted to get down to bedrock, and he was never content with sources considerably later than the period or person under investigation, unless they could be confirmed by contemporary evidence; nor did he ever hesitate to admit ignorance when he was dissatisfied with the material at his disposal. He wanted the truth, and if he could not really find it to his satisfaction was quite ready to admit that the matter might be cleared up some day, but that it was not yet established. A good example of his methods and candour can be seen in his *The Lyons Mail*, when after a searching examination of all the evidence available he refuses to register a confident verdict. And many other similar instances can be found in the seven volumes of his *A History of the Peninsular War*.

But, impressive as was Oman's contribution both in range and quality, the man was more impressive even than his writings. After November 1893, when I was elected to a 'prize' fellowship in All Souls, I was admitted to his friendship and that of his family which continued till his death. And I very soon realized the position that Oman had made for himself in the social life of the college. He was one of the four leading figures, of whom F. Compton (elected as far back as 1846), J. A. Doyle (elected in 1869), and W. P. Ker (elected in 1879) were the others. Oman entered with obvious enjoyment into every phase of our activities, he never paraded his learning or spoke about his books, unless he was directly questioned, and his geniality and high spirits were as attractive as his modesty. His memory made one feel that stories about Macaulay were not exaggerated; his knowledge of all sorts of matters in obscure pockets of the past or neglected by-ways was both accurate and inexhaustible, and he could take up a book or article, glance through it apparently, and then next day repeat almost verbatim its contents, and he never seemed to forget anything, however trivial. He made copious notes, when necessary, of his reading, but what he carried in his head always seemed to be double or treble of what he had noted, and it was always producible if required. In a word, unless you really knew him and heard him in all sorts of different circumstances or controversies you could not grasp the



range and variety of his powers. He probably did not realize the impression made on his junior colleagues, but there was no question of his outstanding position in the life of the college, even if on many issues of policy he was (and almost expected to be) in a minority. For no one could take defeat with a better grace, and once the vote had been registered Oman accepted the result (as he did in Congregation), bore no resentment, and was ready for the next contest, smiling and with undiminished zeal. And these qualities continued as middle age mellowed into old age. He was proud of the college, which was certainly and justifiably proud of him. Amongst the many academic distinctions that rightly came his way, none gave him as great pleasure as the Hon. D.C.L. at Oxford and the Hon. LL.D. at Cambridge. He liked above all to regard himself as 'the Senior Jurist' of the college as defined in the modern edition of the Medieval Charter of the Founder, for to the 'Senior Jurist' was assigned on certain ceremonial occasions a precedence to which Oman was much attached.

It is very unlikely that Oxford or All Souls will ever produce again a second historian with so wide a range of learning, interest, and achievement.

Apart from contributions to specialist journals and periodicals, Oman's books are: *History of Greece* (1888), *Warwick, the King Maker* (1891), *The Byzantine Empire* (1892), *A History of Europe, 476-918* (1893, the first volume in Rivington's Series), *A History of England* (1 vol., 1895), *The Art of War in the Middle Ages* (1898—rev. ed. 1924), *A History of the Peninsular War* (7 vols., 1902-30), *Seven Roman Statesmen* (1902), *The Great Revolt of 1381* (1906), *England before the Norman Conquest* (vol. 1 of Methuen's Series, 1910), *Wellington's Army* (1912), *Colonel Despard* (1922), *Castles* (on the G.W.R., for the Company, 1926), *Napoleonic Studies* (1929), *The Coinage of England* (1931), *Things I have Seen* (1933), *Sixteenth Century Studies* (1936), *The Art of War in the Sixteenth Century* (1937), *On the Writing of History* (1939), *Memories of Victorian Oxford* (1941), *The Lyons Mail* (1945), and completed but not yet published, 'A Study of The Hundreds of England from the Eleventh to the Fifteenth Century'.

CHARLES GRANT ROBERTSON