



Photograph by Walter Stoneman, London

ROBIN ERNEST WILLIAM FLOWER

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1881-1946

ROBIN ERNEST WILLIAM FLOWER was born at Meanwood, Yorkshire, on 16 October 1881. On both sides he came of mixed Anglo-Irish parentage. The Flowers were originally English settlers in Northern Ireland, but Flower's immediate forebears had lived in England (Yorkshire). His mother, Jane Lynch, came of an old Galway family, but she was living at Meanwood Hill Top, Leeds, when she met her future husband, Marmaduke Flower, and her mother was a Yorkshire woman. Marmaduke Clement William Flower, Robin's father, was the son of the Rev. William Balmbo' Flower, a well-known writer and a learned patristic scholar, the translator into English of the *Sermons* of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, works of St. Cyprian, Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, and Thomas á Kempis. He also made some translations from the German. Besides these learned works he published several original tales and a volume of *Classical Tales and Legends*; and he was the editor of *The Churchman's Companion*. He was the son of Marmaduke Flower of Leeds, and was educated at Leeds Grammar School, which he entered on 29 July 1833 at the age of thirteen. He was at one time classical master of Christ's Hospital, and also held a chaplaincy at Baden Baden. Eventually, in April 1868, he was appointed by the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos Colonial Chaplain at Labuan at a salary of £350, and he left England on 16 May from Southampton. He occupied this position, however, but a very short time: on 29 July 1868 a letter was sent from Government House, Labuan, to inform his wife of his death, the result of an accident while mounting his horse. The writer, who speaks highly of his character, states that he was at the time 'engaged in further translations of St. Bernard'.

Scholarly traditions were thus part of Robin Flower's inheritance, but it was no doubt from his grandfather rather than his father that he derived his bent for learning, though some of his aesthetic equipment may have come to him from the latter. Marmaduke Flower had a varied and extraordinary career, as far removed from the scholar's life as one can well conceive. 'Educated', according to the *Gentleman's Journal* of 15 March 1898, 'at Heidelberg, under the famous Dr. Guspie, finishing

later on at St. Andrew's College, Chardstock, Dorset', he ran away from the latter establishment (as the *Gentleman's Journal* does *not* inform its readers), went to sea, and was at various times a soldier in the American Civil War (in which he fought on the Confederate side), a sailor, a midshipman, and a gold-digger in Australia. His career in the army of the South ended with his desertion, when he and a companion jumped from a troop-train into a river. According to Robin's school-friend, the Rev. Dr. J. A. Findlay, to whom I am much indebted for information about Flower's early life and ancestry, 'one of the Hamiltons—I am not sure whether it was Lord Claud or his brother—used to hold him down forcibly under water at school, and he had perforce to learn how to breathe [? hold his breath] under water'. This accomplishment now stood him in good stead: whereas his companion had to come to the surface and was shot, he managed to stay underneath long enough to make his escape, tramped through the States to New York, and eventually reached Canada. He was in the Navy when he received news of his father's sudden death. Making his way to Leeds, where he gathered that his relatives were living, he slept the first night in a barn on the outskirts of the city, and was there arrested by the police and taken to jail. He was recognized next morning by one of the magistrates as a relative of the Vicar of Leeds, and was set free, though his family disowned him. At this point, already a man of some maturity, he suddenly decided to become a landscape-painter, and about the same time married his landlady's daughter. It was not long before a picture by him of the Seven Arches in Meanwood Woods was hung on the line at the Royal Academy. He acquired a considerable reputation as a landscape-painter, but Sir Hubert Herkomer, under whom he began to study in October 1886, advised him to take up portraiture. In an interesting letter, dated 27 July 1889, Herkomer counsels him to avoid photography and gives some sensible advice, very profitable to an artist in the early stages of his career. The instruction fell on fruitful soil and Marmaduke Flower was before long the leading portrait-painter in Leeds. Nor was his well-deserved reputation merely local. A letter from Bishop Mitchinson, Master of Pembroke College, Oxford, testifies to the excellence of a portrait of himself which Flower had painted, as also one of his predecessor, Dr. Price.¹ He seems in fact to

¹ The two portraits mentioned above and another still hang in the College; see Mrs. R. Lane Poole's *Catalogue of Portraits in . . . Oxford*, vol. iii, pp. 252, 254.

have been highly esteemed by the College authorities, and it was mainly his father's connexion with Pembroke which led Robin to try for a scholarship there.

Marmaduke Flower had not very long been a pupil of Herkomer when the latter chose him to be assistant in his school at Bushey. There he made himself invaluable. In a letter of condolence to his widow after his death Herkomer writes of him, on 1 October 1910, as 'my most loyal student, one who *never* failed me, who helped more than all the others to uphold the right tone in my colony of students'.

Thus we have some of the ingredients which went to make up Flower's temperament and mental outfit: a home near the Yorkshire moorlands and a strain of Yorkshire blood, with all which that means of grit and sturdy independence, an Irish ancestry working in him to inspire the nostalgic patriotism which in the exile of mixed origin is often more potent than in the native-born, a tradition of scholarship derived from his grandfather, and a mixture of adventurous adaptability and sensitiveness to beauty which he had from his father. With such antecedents it is easy to understand the direction which his genius took.

Flower's grandfather had, as already said, been a pupil of Leeds Grammar School, and it was in any case natural enough that Robin, living as he did at Headingley, should be sent there. He entered the school in the third term of the year 1894 at the age of twelve. His school-friend, Dr. Findlay, gives a vivid picture of him as a schoolboy.

We had [he says] to cross Woodhouse Moor on our mile's walk—or rather run—to morning school. I was always in danger of being late, but could not help noticing that there was another boy toiling along behind. He was a noticeable object, because he appeared to be trying to read and run at the same time. His pockets always bulged with cheap magazines, mostly of the 'Halfpenny Marvel' and 'Pluck' type. After a while, we took to running together, and in this way a close friendship was begun which lasted for five years. Neither of us was much interested in playing games, and the consequence was that we were to some extent separated from the general life of the school. . . . During the five years between our first meeting and the time when I left school, we were never apart. Even when he got a bicycle, he would push it by my side; when he did ride it, he became known to all the policemen on the route for his habit of trying to read and steer his way through the traffic at the same time. When a very pious lady staying at my home kept getting us into corners and enquiring about the condition of our souls, in desperation we entered into a solemn compact that we would never be good, signing the deed in our own

blood; he charged me in after years with having broken my plighted word, while he had remained faithful to the letter of the bond. At that time he would read anything in print, but I watched him rise from 'Pluck' to 'Chums'—the 'Boys' Own Paper' we regarded as too edifying for our tastes—on to Swinburne, Shelley, and Keats. Several times his pockets were searched by irate masters, and their contents confiscated, while the class gazed in wonder at the quantity of reading matter which could be extracted from them. Alternate evenings we would spend in each other's habitations, and each would see the other home, the process of going to and fro often lasting until we were in danger of being locked out. We went walking-tours together in the Yorkshire dales, and on one occasion for some reason or another we had arranged to go to our starting-point separately. I went, as arranged, to Pateley Bridge in Nidderdale—a railway journey of about 30 miles—only to find no Robin there. I returned home to find he had gone to Apperley Bridge in Airedale by mistake!

Flower's friends will see from this description that in his case the child was indeed father to the man—even in the matter of the mistake over his appointment at Pateley Bridge. And more than one of them will be inclined to say 'ditto' to Dr. Findlay's concluding words: 'Certainly my friendship with Robin Flower made all the difference to my school life; I think it is true to say that, during those years, we had no secrets from one another, and it is quite impossible to put into words what he was to me.'

Flower was at first on the modern side of the school, from which he transferred later to the classical. He won while at school a number of prizes; those for history and literature were much in his way of business, but friends acquainted with his views in later life may be amused to learn that the Hook Theological prize was also awarded to him. He was for a time Honorary Secretary to the Literary and Debating Society, and he appears to have contributed to the school magazine; for example, a very Tennysonian (and, for a schoolboy, remarkably good) poem on 'The Death of Theocritus', which contains several lines characteristic of his style in his earlier poems, can hardly be by any other hand than his. His progress after his transfer to the classical side was so rapid that in little over two years from his first beginning Greek and more advanced Latin he won, in 1899, an open classical scholarship at Pembroke. He had previously passed the Higher Certificate examination with distinction in Latin and had been awarded the school exhibition.

He went up to Oxford in 1900, just before his nineteenth birthday. He seems thoroughly to have enjoyed his life there,

and one can imagine that his reading was discursive and miscellaneous; but, even if we allow for his power of rapid assimilation and his amazingly retentive memory, he can hardly have won a good first in Classical Moderations (in 1902) without working hard at the prescribed subjects of study. A letter to his mother, which bears no date but was obviously written early in the summer term following the examination, and which I quote without altering its characteristic punctuation, or lack of it, gives an amusing account of his reception by the College authorities:

I am feeling quite cheerful again under the influence of spring Oxford. The weather is simply divine absolutely redolent of punts and straw hats and tennis and all else the heart of man can set his desire upon. I met the Master as I went to chapel this morning. He greeted me affectionately 'It is a case of "see the conquering hero comes"' he said 'I congratulate you with all my heart Mr. Flower. Not that we did not expect it, but it was none the less pleasant for that.' He seemed ready to weep on my neck. The Dean congratulated me after chapel. . . . My interview with Benjy was rather curious. [In this affectionate diminutive Oxford men of the period will recognize a very 'fruity' scholar of the old school, to whose lectures on Virgil the present writer for one looks back with gratitude as an inefaceable experience.] He received me joyously. 'I was very pleased to see you among the firsts, Mr. Flower.' I muttered my acknowledgements 'Of course the College will give you a prize of £5 in books. . . .' I thanked him, and then asked if he could find how I did in Mods. He answered 'Do you feel any safer or more comfortable on a railway journey if you have looked into the firebox of the engine before starting'. I was crushed. Then he suddenly said 'By the way how is your father?' 'O he is quite well' I answered 'Will you send him my compliments and say how glad I am he has so good a son' I bowed and mumbled thanks, and said Good Morning.

This extract shows that Flower, despite his indifference as a schoolboy to games, was not insensible of the delights other than intellectual which Oxford has to offer. I never saw him on the river, but from later experience I can imagine the sort of tennis he played. He put into it the same furious energy which he expended on a problem of scholarship. His strokes were sometimes erratic, and he was never a player of outstanding excellence, but a drive which landed in the right place was apt to be unplayable. So, too, in ping-pong, to which in later life he was much addicted: standing firm-set, almost crouching, the upper part of his body inclined decidedly forward, holding his racket with a short grip, his eyes flashing with excitement, his hair all

disordered, he jabbed at the ball in quick, fierce strokes, which sent it flying across the table at an almost agonized speed. He was not an elegant player but very deadly as an opponent. He was moreover a keen and tireless walker. And already in his Oxford days he was a poet, immature indeed but with a genuine inspiration, a strong feeling for the beauty of words, and a true lyrical gift.

It was at Oxford that he made the acquaintance of the late Canon Streeter, then Dean of Pembroke, who was later to be his brother-in-law. Shortly after he had taken 'Mods.' a sister of Streeter's, who wished to become an art student, was discussing the project with her brother in his rooms when Streeter, seeing Flower in the quad and remembering his father's work for the College, exclaimed: 'Let's ask Flower about it.' As a result of the advice then given she became a student in Herkomer's school at Bushey.

Flower followed up his first in 'Mods.' by winning in 1904 a first in 'Greats'. With such a record he could reasonably hope for success in the Civil Service examination, and for this he accordingly sat. But destiny had not designed him for a post in an administrative office. The acquisition in two years of enough Greek to win a classical scholarship must have entailed immense effort, and whatever diversions he may have allowed himself at Oxford he had obviously not spared himself. He was never one who did things by halves; whatever task he undertook he was apt to pursue with a concentrated intensity which called on the last ounce of his mental and physical strength. He had clearly overtaxed his constitution, and during the examination he collapsed and had to be carried out of the room. An almost complete loss of memory was a serious warning, and medical advice enjoined a prolonged period of rest. This he took in the Orkneys but later went to Cologne, apparently with a view to the possibility of becoming a candidate for a post in the British Museum. His first attempt was, however, for one in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Perhaps he had not yet fully regained his powers; at all events he was unsuccessful, and it is interesting to record that his victorious competitor was Sir Eric Maclagan. His next enterprise was more prosperous: he sat for the British Museum examination and was appointed a Second Class Assistant in the Department of Manuscripts, where he took up his duties on 10 September 1906.

I was his senior by three years and a few months. Being much of an age and with a great deal in common, we were soon fast

friends. We were both of mixed blood, he English-Irish, I English-Welsh, both born and brought up outside the country of our most intimate love, both keenly interested in all things Celtic, both Oxford men, both classics, both enthusiastic lovers of poetry. Flower may well have nursed for years the ambition to learn Irish, but I fancy it was the discovery that I was already studying Welsh which gave him the final impulse. Like myself he was at that time in what I may perhaps call the Ossianic or romantic phase of Celtic enthusiasm. Later he was to show up with decision and fine critical acumen the falsity of the Ossianic landscape, writing 'The one great English poet whose style suffered the infection of Ossian is William Blake, for Macpherson must take a great part of the responsibility for the change from the piercing intensity of the lyrics to the muffled rhetoric of the prophetic books';¹ but in 1905 he was still under the illusion of the 'Celtic Twilight'. I treasure a copy of Fiona Macleod's *The Sin-Eater* given me by him in the early days of our friendship, with a dedicatory poem beginning

Because a dream is in our blood
 And in our hearts a strange desire
 Of roses of no earthly bud
 And flames of not an earthly fire

 We find no rest in this closed world
 But send our vagrant thoughts astray
 Where on the walls of darkness hurled
 Die the last onsets of the day.

We dreamed in those days of many things to which the hard logic of fact denied fulfilment, among others of a joint catalogue of the Welsh manuscripts in the British Museum. Never before, in all probability, we reflected, had the Department had simultaneously two Assistants, one of whom specialized in the Celtic languages while the other had some knowledge of Welsh; it was improbable that such a chance would occur again; now was the time to produce a comprehensive and up-to-date catalogue of the manuscript resources which the Museum possessed for Welsh studies. But my Greek papyri and Flower's Irish catalogue, with the many miscellaneous tasks which the work of the Department entailed, and, later, increasing administrative responsibilities, made it impossible even to broach the scheme.

Flower, as I remember him in those days (and years, if they

¹ *Byron and Ossian* (Byron Foundation Lecture), Nottingham, 1928.

mellowed, did not essentially change him) was of a singularly vivid and arresting personality. He had a quite extraordinary power of concentration and was able to extract the essence of a book or an article in about a fifth of the time required by others; indeed he appeared to possess the knack of getting all he required from it by a glance at the cover and a hasty skimming of the pages. He began from the first the practice of wandering about the Department and taking down from the shelves any manuscript which caught his attention. So rapidly could he assimilate its contents and so marvellous was his memory that before he had been more than a year or two in the Department he knew infinitely more about the collections than most of us could ever claim to do. He probably spent in these divagations much time which should have gone to the routine duties of the moment, but the speed with which he worked was such that he produced as satisfactory results as some who stuck more closely to their allotted tasks, and the knowledge he acquired was of incalculable service to his colleagues and to inquiring members of the public. He was no doubt helped by his self-confidence. This was in fact probably not as great as it appeared superficially, and certainly in scholarship he observed a praiseworthy caution, but in talk his opinions were positive and emphatic. His drastic dismissal of any opinion which did not commend itself to him and a self-centredness which was his chief (I think one might say, his only serious) fault at times gave pain, leaving in some people an impression that he was lacking in sympathy and kindness. But this was to do him a grave injustice. He mentioned to me on one occasion that he was spending many of his evenings in reading aloud to an elderly artist who was dying of consumption. The remark was dropped casually apropos of something else, but the act was characteristic. All his life he was the soul of kindness, ready to do a service to anyone who required it, freely spending time and money and effort in helping the many friends and acquaintances, and not infrequently even perfect strangers, who appealed to him. With his forcefulness of manner, and even at times an apparent ruthlessness, went a real moral sensitiveness and a high standard of integrity, alike in scholarship and in personal conduct; and his exceptional mental gifts did not exclude a certain naïveté, even an ingenuous simplicity, of character.

There was no subject within the Department's scope in which he did not take some interest and acquire at least a modicum of relevant knowledge, and his private reading was extensive and

omnivorous, ranging from solid volumes of scholarship and remote by-ways of literature to the lightest and most ephemeral contemporary fiction. The ardour of his quest for knowledge was matched by the enthusiasm with which he both read and wrote poetry.

For a short time after joining the staff of the Museum he lived at Highgate, in rooms overlooking Waterlow Park, later with his parents at Bushey; but eventually he settled with a fellow poet, Vivian Locke Ellis, in quarters in Whitcomb Street, where he lived until his marriage. A visit to their rather bohemian establishment was an enjoyable and stimulating experience. Between them they planned and, with the collaboration of several friends, eventually launched in 1910 a literary periodical called *The Open Window*. Shortlived, as is the way of such ventures, it survived at least to reach the end of volume ii. The daintily produced little volumes, adorned with good pictures by artists of distinction, are a precious memorial of this friendship; the list of contributors includes such names (besides those of the two promoters) as E. M. Forster, De la Mare, John Drinkwater, St. John Lucas, James Stephens, Lord Dunsany, W. H. Davies (who took over Flower's lodgings with Locke Ellis when Flower vacated them on his marriage), Hugh de Selincourt, Jack Yeats, Maxwell Armfield, and Claude Shepperson. The second volume includes a fine verse rendering by Flower of an early Irish poem, 'Tempest on the Sea', ascribed to Ruman mac Colmáin, an early fruit of his Irish studies. 'The Poems of John of Dorsington, Chantry Priest of Stratford-on-Avon', in vol. i, a group of three charming lyrics in the medieval manner, may have puzzled some readers of the magazine, who perhaps thought them a modernizing by Flower of poems in Middle English. They are in fact the sole relics (I cannot recall whether any others were written) of a projected *jeu d'esprit* about which he had spoken enthusiastically to me some time before. It was his intention to write a number of these poems and, if I remember rightly, to furnish them with a 'spoof' introduction and commentary as the work of an imaginary cleric of Stratford. But like so many other schemes this never found fulfilment, and the three lyrics published in *The Open Window* alone survive to recall the jest. Whether it would have deceived any reader, or was seriously intended to do so, I rather doubt.

In 1911 Flower married Miss Ida Mary Streeter, the late Canon Streeter's youngest sister, whom, as related above, he had first met at Oxford. They settled at first in Chelsea, removing

later to Coulsdon, afterwards to Croydon, and eventually to Southgate, where they were living at the time of Flower's death. It was a singularly happy union, not the less happy or the less complete because they kept their separate identities and each was in a sense curiously detached—'two distincts, division none' as a friend remarked, happily applying to them a line from *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. The understanding and self-forgetting singleness of mind with which his wife helped and seconded him throughout their married life can never be forgotten by his friends. Readers of his poems will be familiar with the beautiful series of ten Shakespearian sonnets, the Patmorean lyrics (themselves sonnets of an irregular pattern) called 'Beauty', the four-line poetic epigrams, and other poems inspired by his love for his wife. The ten sonnets were all written, if I remember rightly, within a week, and the intense concentration which this necessitated left Flower for a time quite exhausted.

Flower had not been long at the Museum before he resolved to learn Irish. At first he took private lessons in his spare time, and so good was the progress he made that he ventured to broach to the then Keeper, Sir George Warner, a project which I fancy had been in his mind from the first: that he should complete the catalogue of Irish manuscripts commenced by Standish Hayes O'Grady in 1886 but never finished. A large portion of it, amounting to 706 pages, had been printed, and some copies had been bound for use in the Department, but it had not seemed advisable to publish a mere fragment. The proposal to continue this work, after an Irish scholar of such distinction as O'Grady, was a bold one when we consider that Flower was still a beginner in the language and that Old Irish at least, which it would obviously be necessary to acquire, is by common consent the most difficult of the Indo-European tongues; but Warner knew his man, and Flower's confidence in his own powers was justified. The plan was submitted to the Trustees and approved by them. Flower rightly felt that if he was to do justice to his task he must have the best instruction available, and he suggested that he should be given facilities for this at Dublin. A report submitted by Warner to the Trustees on 11 June 1910 asked on his behalf for three weeks' special leave for the purpose of attending lectures by Professor Marstrander in Dublin on 'The Old and Middle Irish language and literature' and also of making himself acquainted with the Irish manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy. Special leave was granted, as recorded in a minute of 8 October 1910, and the Treasury made a grant of £15

towards Flower's expenses. A report submitted on 12 November following states that he had attended lectures on Irish and had taken 'lessons in the modern spoken language and also worked at MSS.'.

During his stay at Dublin Flower made several enduring friendships. One of these was with his teacher, Marstrander, who was later to stand godfather to his eldest daughter. His choice of godparents is indeed a guide to some of his friendships: Kuno Meyer, then Professor at Liverpool, whose acquaintance he made not long after taking up the study of Irish, was godfather to his second daughter, and among the godparents of his third daughter were two for whom he always entertained a quite special regard, Professor W. P. Ker and Mrs. J. R. Green. For Ker's scholarship and personality he had an admiration hardly this side of idolatry, and he was profoundly influenced by Ker's views on literary history. To Mrs. Green he owed much encouragement in his Irish studies and an affectionate kindness which never failed him. Whether it was in Dublin or in London that he first met her I cannot say; but one friend first met in the former city was the Austrian Celticist, Dr. Pokorny, a fellow pupil in Marstrander's class.

It was Marstrander who suggested a visit to the Great Blasket as the best means of acquiring fluency in spoken Irish. Flower acted on this advice, and thus formed the close ties with that remote and storm-beaten island which meant so much to him and which he put to such excellent use. His translation of Tomás Ó Crohan's autobiography published as *The Islandman* (Talbot Press, Dublin and Cork, 1934), a real masterpiece of sympathetic interpretation, and his original work, *The Western Island* (Clarendon Press, 1944), which he was fortunately able to see through the press after he had already been incapacitated by the illness to which he eventually succumbed, are permanent memorials of his association with the island, and will preserve the record of a singularly interesting popular culture long after the standardization of modern life has destroyed it. He paid frequent visits to the Blaskets, often spending his summer vacation there, and collected from Ó Crohan and others a great mass of stories, traditions, and island memories. Some of these materials he wrote down himself; others were recorded on a dictaphone, which on one of his visits was transported across the unquiet strait, along with himself, a goat, and an internal-combustion engine committed to his charge, in one of the flimsy coracles which are the chief means of communication between island and

mainland. Residence in the Great Blasket must indeed have entailed some measure of hardship, but Flower was never fastidious, and he lived cheerfully and happily in the house of the 'king' of the island under conditions from which some scholars might have shrunk, sharing the king's kitchen with poultry and other domestic fauna, exchanging experiences and reflections on the mysteries of life with the villagers, and taking down from their lips whatever of traditional lore they had to impart. He would roam the island, watching the islanders at work in their barren fields, chatting to them as they took an *al fresco* meal or smoked beside their hauled-up coracles, would accompany them on their fishing expeditions, and, if any of them ever ventured so far afield as to visit London, would greet them with a never-failing hospitality. More than once his visits entailed actual peril. On one occasion, when the sea was so stormy that the boatmen declared it impossible to put out from Dunquin, Flower stood on shore discussing the possibilities with the little crowd which had gathered while his wife sat waiting in the coracle, when, turning to the beach, he saw that the boatmen, suddenly changing their minds, had started without him; and he had to wait on land, not knowing whether the frail craft would ever reach the island. On another, when he was spending his vacation with his family on the Blasket and had arranged to be back at the Museum on a Monday morning so that I could leave for my own holiday that afternoon, so violent a storm broke out that he was unable to embark till the Saturday and then on a sea of such turbulence that the coracle could not make the harbour at Dunquin, and Flower and his family were landed at the foot of the cliff, hauled up the face of it, and so, transported thence in a manure-cart which was going to Dingle, caught the train by the skin of their teeth. Flower, leaving his wife ill at Dublin, arrived at the Museum on Monday afternoon when I had quite abandoned hope of seeing him.

Hardships and perils notwithstanding, his visits to the Blaskets were of immense service to Flower's studies. They had a direct bearing on a subject which always attracted his particular attention and in regard to which he owed much to Ker's books, the popular transmission of traditional literature and legend, for he was able to see, and to record from personal observation, this phase of culture, long outgrown for most people in England, still actively going on. His charming talk *How a Folk Tale is Told*, broadcast from Cardiff in the B.B.C.'s Welsh service on 3 September 1941, showed how much the experience had meant to

him. He profited also linguistically, acquiring a proficiency in spoken Irish which he could hardly have attained otherwise. His knowledge of the language and literature was of course greatly increased by his work in preparation for the catalogue of Irish Manuscripts, by constant study at home, by correspondence with Irish scholars in the British Isles or abroad, and not least (for to teach a subject is as good a way as any of mastering it) by his appointment to be Honorary Lecturer in Celtic at University College, London. Simultaneously he was acquiring additional qualifications for his task. The Department of Manuscripts has never had a staff large enough to allow of its individual members becoming pure specialists, and Flower's interests were in any case too wide and various for an excessive specialization. His hand can be recognized in many descriptions scattered about the *Catalogue of Additions*, for which he described manuscripts of the most diverse kinds, medieval and modern, and in various languages. He continued his practice of dipping into any volume which attracted his attention, and wandered down many by-paths of scholarship, acquiring in time an intimate acquaintance with several branches of medieval studies. He was, too, a tireless reader of English literature, with a particular interest in certain authors and periods, Swift and Goldsmith, for example, and the Elizabethan period. He managed also, without much formal study, to pick up a considerable knowledge of Anglo-Saxon; and his interest in Middle English led him to join the Early English Text Society, and to become later a member of its Committee, and eventually its Acting Director. All these interests were apt to entice him away from strictly Irish studies, and in a letter of 6 December 1911 Kuno Meyer, apropos of some work Flower was then doing on 'those Mexican hieroglyphics', wrote to him, 'I hope you will soon return to your Irish work, which is so much more important'; but they certainly widened his perspective and gave him a background to which he could relate his view of Irish literature. He was, moreover, continuing to write poetry with growing metrical mastery and a greater maturity of thought and feeling. He wrote a good deal in forms reminiscent of Patmore's *Unknown Eros*, and he was so far influenced by the prevailing enthusiasm for *vers libre* as to experiment with looser metrical patterns, though without losing his rhythmical ease or sacrificing the articulate structure of his verse; the slackness and slovenliness of some contemporaries aroused his outspoken indignation. A reference may be made here to the charming little volumes of verse privately printed for

several years and circulated 'among his private friends' in lieu of Christmas cards.

When the time came to begin the actual preparation of his catalogue he was thus equipped with qualifications rarely, if ever, combined in a single scholar before. I do not know when he formed his design, which he certainly nursed from quite early in his career, of writing a history of Irish literature, but it was intimately connected with the plan of the catalogue. O'Grady's lively and highly individual style in his portion could not be followed by Flower. Tolerated perforce in a distinguished outsider, so personal a tone was unsuitable to an official work produced by a member of the Department. Yet the knowledge acquired in the course of the work could, in a general introduction, be gathered together, co-ordinated, and built up into a coherent sketch of Irish literary development during the period covered by the catalogue, which, owing to the special conditions prevailing in Ireland, meant in effect the main course of Irish literature. This, then, was Flower's programme: first to continue and complete in volume ii the description of individual manuscripts begun by O'Grady in the first volume; then, in a third volume, to give detailed indexes to the whole work, preceded by a general introduction, in which he would not only deal with the formation of the collection and the migrations of the volumes composing it, but sketch the literary tradition of Ireland as illustrated by surviving manuscripts, the activities of the scribal families, and the development of the various schools; then, at a later date, perhaps after his retirement, to use this material, no longer in the coldly impersonal style of an official catalogue, but with all the literary skill at his command, for a really comprehensive history of Irish literature.

As already said, he had peculiar qualifications for the task. His philological equipment, while it might fall below that of many Celtic scholars (for, though a good linguist, he was not a grammarian *par métier* and had no early grounding in comparative etymology), was at least adequate, and he had by now studied Irish literature widely. He had acquired a fair working knowledge of Welsh and rather more than a nodding acquaintance with Welsh literature. He was far from singular among Celtic scholars in having received an excellent classical education, but was more exceptional in his wide-ranging knowledge of medieval studies. He was an expert palaeographer, with a natural flair for the characteristics of a hand (a very important asset in this branch of scholarship) and considerable experience

in dealing with manuscripts. His knowledge of English literature was extensive and intimate, and he had read many of the leading continental authors. He was an outstandingly good literary critic, rather exacting perhaps in his standards and not without his prejudices (he had in general little inclination to religious and mystical literature, and he once told me he had never in his life felt any need of a religious belief), but he was too honest and too sensitive to literary merit not to respond to excellence in any sphere. Thus he could bring to his Irish studies not merely the enthusiasm of the scholar but the appreciation of the poet, while on the other hand he never allowed his love of Ireland to deflect his judgement and lead him into making extravagant claims for a literature of whose great merits he was none the less sensitively aware. He was essentially a poet, who, although not as well known as his merits deserved, had won an assured place among the writers of the day. Æ wrote to him on 10 January 1924: 'I like all the verses indeed I like all your verses which I have read and it is a pity you do not write more. But I know how difficult it is to make a space in the soul for the delicate flower of poetry to grow, so many other plants the useful cabbages and potatoes of thought come insisting for room based on their utilitarian value.' In his volume *Hymenaea*, published in 1918, the sequence of ten sonnets, 'The Dead', with its subtle and haunting rhythmical movement, and such poems, in Patmore's manner, as 'In the Train', 'The Vigil of Saint Venus', and 'In Church' show how far he had advanced in technical mastery, while 'The Hedge-Schoolmaster to his Love', which begins, 'O dearest of dear ones, O sweeter than sweetness', a poem which might easily be a happy rendering of a modern Irish or a seventeenth-century Welsh lyric, illustrates the extent to which he had absorbed the spirit of Celtic poetry. His translations from the Irish are indeed masterly, and will certainly be a permanent contribution to the none too abundant store of satisfactory English renderings from the Celtic literatures. Lastly, he was the master of an admirable prose style, lively, interesting, picturesque, and with a happy gift of phrase. He seemed indeed to have been chosen and prepared by destiny to produce the first really adequate and revealing survey of the Irish literary achievement.

The *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. i by O'Grady, vol. ii by Flower, was published in 1926, and its appearance was universally hailed as a major event in Celtic studies. One distinguished Irish scholar wrote to Flower (3 June 1926): 'I congratulate you most heartily on the achievement of

so splendid a piece of work. It surpasses all my expectations, high though they were. It is a veritable encyclopaedia, such as I thought no one man could accomplish.' Another wrote: 'You have like O'Grady, only in another direction, given us far more than we had any right to expect in a Catalogue. You have founded a solid basis for the future historian of Irish literature to build upon—tracing the sources for him of the various tracts you describe, and the centres of learning from which they have emanated.' Flower's volume had a Preface explaining the genesis and nature of the catalogue and giving an account of O'Grady's career. Flower here sets forth the principles followed by him in his part of the work: 'In this present volume an attempt is made, subject to the necessary limitations of the material and the cataloguer, to study the literature in its growth, to delimit its different classes, periods and districts, and, in particular, to isolate the foreign influences by the method of determining the sources of translated texts. . . . The descriptions of manuscripts have been so arranged as to illustrate, so far as the material allows, the history of the literature in its different periods and schools and kinds.'

These extracts indicate very fairly the special importance of Flower's work. Celtic scholars in general had tended, not unnaturally, to deal with Irish literature piecemeal: to select for their editorial activities particular texts or groups of texts which interested them, to copy these from the best available manuscripts, collating with any others that were accessible, and so to treat the works concerned in isolation. Few, if any, had conceived the idea of studying a whole manuscript as a corpus of literature, still less of analysing the contents of many manuscripts; of asking where each was written and in what circumstances, how it came to contain just those texts and no others, what was its relation to other similar manuscripts, and what light the answers to such questions might throw on the development of Irish literature in general. This was Flower's undertaking, and he was helped in it by his palaeographical training and by the medieval knowledge which enabled him to relate Irish literature to that of the contemporary world of which, however remote and detached Ireland might be, it yet formed a part. Thus he identified the external sources of several texts which had passed as original Irish works.

He was already at work on volume iii. The manuscripts described in volumes i and ii he had indexed while describing them, but the slips had still to be thrown together, arranged, and

revised. This task he took up shortly after he had finished the preparation of volume ii. The slips did not require an inordinate time to arrange roughly; the revision was a much longer task, which occupied him at intervals during the rest of his official life and was never quite completed. There was also the Introduction to be written. This he also began without delay, and when he had finished what was intended to be the first portion, giving the history of the various groups of Irish manuscripts which, passing one by one into the possession of the Trustees, made up the Museum collection, it was decided to send to the printers so much as had been already written. Proofs began to arrive in 1929, and eventually all this portion was printed and will in due course appear in volume iii. But the rest of the Introduction, that preliminary survey of the literary schools and the activities of successive scribes which was, as it were, to pave the way for the projected history of Irish literature, was never even begun. There were too many calls on Flower's time. An attempt was indeed made, by relieving him of some administrative tasks, to set him free for his main work; but the multiplicity of his interests and the very energy which drove him constantly to fresh undertakings nullified any advantage thus obtained. He could never resist the attraction of a new interest; everything he came across in his daily work had its threat to the steady pursuit of his Irish studies and was liable to send him off hotfoot on some novel trail. The schemes he conceived were innumerable, and though some were of no more than a moment's conception others led him into lengthy researches. The autographs of Oliver Goldsmith, the bibliography of Swift, the letters of Horace Walpole, alleged Shakespeare autographs, the literary activity of the Anglo-Welsh border under the early Plantagenets, particularly the importance of Worcester as a literary centre, the historical and antiquarian movement in Elizabethan England, Anglo-Saxon studies—these were among the interests which, successively or concurrently, occupied his attention. Visitors came to consult him on many problems, and he was never sparing of the time he gave them; sometimes he would be closeted the greater part of a day with some caller. Outside, too, he was more and more involved in responsibilities which claimed his energies. He continued his work as Honorary Lecturer in Celtic at University College; he was on the Council of the Irish Texts Society, whose Chairman he became, and the Council of the Irish Genealogical Society; and in 1931 he joined the Committee of the Early English Text Society, with whose work thenceforward he grew ever more

closely associated, until in 1940 he became Honorary Acting Director of the Society.

Distracted among these many calls on his time, Flower at last realized, as his friends had done already, that he was unlikely to achieve his full design, at least while he remained at the Museum. He was often worried, I am sure, by the difficulty of doing justice to his various interests, and in the later years of his official life I had at times the feeling that the readiness with which his mind gave access to new projects was itself an unconscious flight from a problem growing insoluble; it was easier to plan a new undertaking than to resume an old one too long neglected. His method of work constantly overtaxed a constitution always highly strung and not too robust. He rarely finished a task until the last possible moment, flinging himself on to it at the eleventh hour in a perfect fury of energy. I remember on one occasion, when he was to deliver an important lecture in the first half of the following week, his telling me on Saturday that he had not yet begun to write it. He spent all Sunday and most of the following night at the typewriter, and was back at the Museum on Monday morning exhausted but triumphant. It was a costly method of procedure and he was often urged to change it, but he always said, doubtless with truth, that this was the only way in which he *could* work; and certainly some of his best prose was written under high pressure.

In 1927 Flower gave at the British Academy the Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture, taking for his subject *Ireland and Medieval Europe*. In a note to this lecture, which might be described as a sort of *praeludium* to his history of Irish literature, he states that 'a discussion of the development of the Irish manuscript tradition . . . will form part of the Introduction to the forthcoming third volume of the *Catalogue of Irish MSS. in the British Museum*'. He still entertained, then, the design of including in that work some at least of his conclusions on the growth of Irish literature, but by about 1930 he had finally abandoned the idea, and had decided to confine his Introduction to the portion already written and to reserve what he had to say on the larger subject for the days of his retirement. He did, however, sketch the main lines of the development in 1935, when he was invited to give the Lowell Lectures at Harvard University. This visit to the United States, in which he was accompanied by one of his daughters, was a strenuous, not to say a hectic, time, but he enjoyed it whole-heartedly. He was not only Lowell Lecturer at Harvard but Woodward Lecturer at Yale and W. Vaughan

Moody Lecturer at Chicago, and he gave single lectures elsewhere. The Lowell Lectures were concerned chiefly with the Blaskets, though they included one on Irish poetry. Others, in which he dealt with Irish literary history, lively, excellently designed, full of colour and literary charm, and containing within their limited space a vast amount of information, furnish a vivid idea of what his history would have been like had he lived to write it. After his breakdown in health he was strongly urged to publish them as they were. He was, reasonably enough, reluctant to do this, since he felt that a fuller documentation and justification of the sometimes novel and unorthodox theories categorically stated in them ought to be given; but as the conviction grew that he would never again be fit for the continuous and concentrated effort which this would require, he became more favourably disposed to the project; and it is very satisfactory to know that the lectures will in fact be published by the Clarendon Press. In them, in the John Rhys Lecture already referred to, in various scattered articles and lectures (some of which it is hoped to issue in a volume of his papers), and above all in volume ii of the Irish catalogue, a contribution of lasting value has been made to Irish studies.

Some of the other studies already alluded to also issued in valuable publications. His Gollancz Memorial Lecture given in 1934 on *Laurence Nowell and the Discovery of England in Tudor Times* illustrates his interest in the antiquarian movement of the Elizabethan period. This was a subject which increasingly attracted him, and on which he designed further work. It was stimulated by his official duties in connexion with the projected new catalogue of the Cottonian manuscripts; those containing the correspondence of Cotton and his contemporaries were among the volumes which he asked to be allowed to describe himself. Two articles contributed to the *National Library of Wales Journal* in 1941 and 1943 respectively (see the Bibliography) are further signs of this interest. He conceived also a special interest in Sir John Price as a collector of manuscripts, and intended to write an article on him. He emphasized in his work on these sixteenth-century scholars the characteristic bent of their studies and the difference between them and later bibliophiles, such, for example, as the Earl of Arundel or Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford. The Elizabethan antiquaries were not miscellaneous collectors; their acquisitions of manuscripts sprang in the main from their interest in British history, and the character of the collections they formed was determined by that bias.

Flower's interest in Anglo-Saxon studies was shown by his collaboration with R. W. Chambers and Max Förster in editing (in 1933) the facsimile of the Exeter Book of early English poetry, to which he contributed a chapter (vii) on the script, besides sharing with Chambers the task of transcribing the damaged portions of the manuscript (chapter vi), and, in 1941, by the edition (with Hugh Smith) for the Early English Text Society of a facsimile of the Parker Chronicle and Laws (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 173). His Giff Edwards Memorial Lecture, *Lost Manuscripts*, published in the *Transactions* of the Royal Society of Literature for 1940, gives a fascinating account of the search for and discovery of various notable manuscripts, and an article contributed to the *National Library of Wales Journal* in 1940 on 'A Metrical Life of St. Wulfstan of Worcester' was in intention an earnest of more extensive studies on Worcester as a literary centre. Lastly, he found in Exeter Cathedral Library MS. 3514 an important 'Cronica de Wallia', closely related in parts to the text of the Welsh *Brut y Tywysogion* contained in Peniarth MS. 20. He decided to edit this as part of a new edition of the *Annales Cambriae* and invited Dr. Thomas Jones of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, to collaborate with him in the task. Unfortunately his breakdown in 1942 made it necessary to abandon the project; but Dr. Jones has since published the 'Cronica' and other texts from the same manuscript in *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, xii. 26-44.

As Flower's work grew more widely known honours came to him from various quarters. He was elected in 1934 a Fellow of the British Academy, and other distinctions which he received from time to time were Membership of the Royal Irish Academy, Fellowship of the Royal Historical Society, Corresponding Fellowship of the Mediaeval Academy of America, and the honorary degrees of D.Litt.Celt. from the National University of Ireland and D.Litt. from Trinity College, Dublin.

During the years 1937-9, as the shadow of war darkened over Europe, arrangements were made for removing to places of greater security elsewhere the most important of the British Museum's collections. It was decided that Keepers should remain in London and that Deputy Keepers (or the senior Deputy Keeper in Departments which had more than one) should take charge of the material removed. Flower was designated as custodian of the manuscripts selected for removal to the National Library of Wales; and on Wednesday, 23 August 1939, when word came that packing was to be commenced, he left

London for Aberystwyth. According to the arrangements previously made he would have been in charge merely of the Western manuscripts from his own Department, but owing to circumstances which prevented the Senior Deputy Keeper of Printed Books from going to Aberystwyth Flower was senior among the officers established there, and on him consequently devolved the general responsibility for all the Museum collections housed in the National Library. This entailed a great deal of administrative detail, often of a kind vexatious to a man of Flower's temperament, who had little taste for administration. It is likely that his constitution was already impaired by the energy and diversity of his activities, and the mental strain caused to him by various worries incidental to his position—worries of which some temperaments would have taken little heed—undoubtedly tried him greatly. A slow but steady decline in his health and his capacity for coping with his responsibilities was observable—though by colleagues not daily in touch with him hardly observed—during the years he spent at Aberystwyth. Yet his brain continued active and enterprising. He found new interests in the manuscripts of the National Library, formed new projects of future work, and undertook to deliver the Ford Lectures at Oxford, though he had subsequently to withdraw from this commitment. In the autumn of 1942, while lecturing for University College, London, then centred at Aberystwyth, on *The English Tradition of Research*, he collapsed and had to be helped out of the hall. It was a serious warning, and he wisely suspended all unnecessary work for the time being. Heart trouble was suggested, but an examination by a heart specialist in London during April 1943 revealed nothing very seriously wrong. His relief was great and I suspect that for a time he did not spare himself as much as he should have done. But his health was now giving those round him real cause for alarm. On 18 October 1943 he and his wife returned to London for a short holiday, and during the following night he was taken alarmingly ill. Not quite a stroke, said the doctor who examined him, but apparently as near to it as made little difference. He rallied and gradually grew better. At first he suffered from an almost complete loss of memory; the most familiar names and words would escape him, and for a time he could not read at all; he could, he said, recognize the letters but lacked the power to put them together. Months passed, with a slow improvement; he could once more read (though not for long or with much concentration) and write letters. He even wrote the charming

preface to *The Western Island*, a book written before his illness, whose publication gave him great pleasure. But slight attacks kept throwing him back, and it gradually became clear to him, as to others, that his effective working days were done. A letter from an old acquaintance written to him on 15 February 1945 shows that he was still able and willing to put his knowledge and his judgement at the service of others: 'It is like the person who wrote the letter of twenty years ago to be so ready to explain the points I raised, to offer to trace those verbs, and to hold out the chance of a copy of your translation of Tomás' book.' The last time I saw him was not long after Christmas 1945. He was, outwardly, much like his old self, but he spoke despondingly of his prospects; he feared that some new attack might destroy his power to think coherently. Fortunately he was spared that calamity, and on 16 January 1946, after only a few hours' illness, he died.

It is often said of a notable man after his death that he was himself more remarkable than anything he did. This is certainly true of Flower: his vivid and forceful personality, his brilliant talk, ranging over many themes and spiced with a humour never malicious, his gift of anecdote and the delightful lilt with which he would tell an Irish story, his fresh and critical judgement, and his gift of friendship will linger in the memory of his friends but must be lost when those who knew him are dead. Yet in his writings much of the man himself will live, and his contributions to scholarship are real and lasting.

[The writer is much indebted to Mrs. Flower and her family for details used in the above Memoir, and to the Rev. Dr. J. A. Findlay, Flower's brother-in-law, for reminiscences of Flower's early life and information about his ancestry; also to Mr. T. C. Skeat for consulting on his behalf in the British Museum some publications not available in the National Library of Wales. The bibliography printed below, included because so many of Flower's contributions to scholarship were made in the form of isolated articles, was compiled almost entirely by members of his family. It does not aim at absolute completeness, omitting some minor reviews and brief notes and not recording republications of poems in anthologies, &c., but it is believed that it includes all publications of any importance.]

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