REYNOLD ALLEYNE NICHOLSON

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1868–1945

REYNOLD ALLEYNE NICHOLSON was born on 18 August 1868; his father, Henry Alleyne Nicholson, being at the time a surgeon in practice at Keighley in Yorkshire. Of his paternal forbears it is known that for the greater part of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they lived in Cumberland, on an estate known as Thorpe, which they themselves owned and farmed. Mark Nicholson, born in 1770, appears to have broken the agrarian traditions of the family by going to Oxford and taking orders, becoming a Fellow of Queen's College. On being appointed to the Presidency of Codrington College, Barbados, he migrated to the West Indies, where he married a daughter of the Alleyne family. His son, John Nicholson, after leaving Queen's College, Oxford, achieved something of a reputation as a Biblical scholar, adopted the Swedenborgian tenets and acquired a sufficient knowledge of, and interest in, Arabic and Persian literature to make, with a certain amount of taste and discrimination, a collection of manuscripts. This collection afterwards came into the possession of his grandson, the subject of this memoir, to whom, according to family tradition, he endeavoured to teach Arabic, without, however, arousing any interest; although it may with some plausibility be assumed that his efforts were not entirely fruitless. His son, Henry Alleyne Nicholson, a distinguished biologist, inherited his academic tastes. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society and Professor successively at the Universities of St. Andrews and Aberdeen.

In these two cities Reynold Alleyne Nicholson went to school. He came up to Cambridge in 1887 as a pensioner (or commoner) of Trinity, where he read Classics and did well, being awarded the Porson Prize for Greek verse in his first year and taking a First in the Classical Tripos (Part I) in 1889, when he was made a scholar of his college. It was after this that he began to display an interest, possibly inherited, in Oriental languages. In 1892 he was awarded a First Class in the Indian Languages Tripos, having so far neglected his Classics in the meantime—or so it would appear—that he dropped to a Third in the Classical Tripos (Part II) of 1891. It may be that both Classics and Oriental languages had had to make concessions to other

interests, because Nicholson played golf for Cambridge against Oxford in 1888, 1890, and 1891. It was a game which he continued to play well and fairly regularly until he left Cambridge in the recent war, although it is in keeping with his selective spirit that he was scarcely ever known to play on the local Gog Magog course, preferring what he regarded as the more sporting one at Royston.

In 1893 Trinity elected him to a Fellowship. For short periods in the immediately preceding years he had been to Leyden and Strasbourg, where he read Arabic; at the former University with de Goeje and others and at the latter with the famous Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke. His first meeting with Edward Granville Browne was in 1891, when he began Persian. It was a meeting which was to have fruitful consequences, because from then onwards the two remained in close association and thirty years later he dedicated two volumes of studies to this friend, 'whose teaching and example', as he says, 'first inspired me to pursue the study of Oriental learning'. At about the same period he made the acquaintance of W. Robertson Smith, Lord Almoner's Professor of Arabic and one-time editor of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. But it was Persian that attracted him, and his first publication, even though he embarked upon the subject after consultation with Robertson Smith, was *Selected Poems from the Dīvāni Shamsi Tabrīz* (Cambridge, 1898), a work of mature scholarship even then; its Persian text so well edited, translated, and annotated that it has become a classic.

For a brief period Nicholson left Cambridge in 1901 to occupy the Chair of Persian at University College, London; but he returned to succeed Browne as Lecturer in Persian when Browne himself became Sir Thomas's Professor of Arabic on the death of William Wright. Nicholson in his turn succeeded to the Chair of Arabic in 1926; but his occupation of it was comparatively brief, since his retirement under the age limit came in 1933, and it can scarcely be said to have affected his course of study or research except to a very moderate degree. He died at Chester on the 27th of August 1945, having had bestowed on him in his lifetime honours which greatly pleased him, amongst them an honorary degree (LL.D.) of Aberdeen University, a Fellowship of the British Academy, the Gold Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society, and an Associate Membership of the Persian Academy.

Nicholson's quiet way of life and the placidity of his character

were in accord with his chosen subject of mysticism. Few men indeed can have been better endowed by nature with the quality of *aequanimitas*, and one might almost imagine his natural endowment to have been improved by cultivation. Not that he could not be roused. When he was convinced that a certain course of action was right, or he felt that injustice was being done, he could be stirred to speak his mind—and his words were generally effective. One felt that due consideration had been given to all that might be said on the question, for and against.

A general attitude of detachment almost inevitably has as its corollary a certain reserve of manner; yet persons who came into contact with Nicholson, whether as students or colleagues, could be assured of genuine kindliness which aroused affection in those who came to know him well. Obvious witness to that are the gifts which came to him from Indian and other students and the various books which were dedicated to him. Another aspect of his general attitude of detachment was that he appeared to be oblivious to practical—or at any rate party—politics; certainly he never discussed them except with a philosophic tolerance, for the reason that he was never scornful of common human tastes and activities. As has been said above, he played golf well; also he enjoyed good wine, good food, and witty talk, and he did not despise detective yarns.

It is in keeping with this characteristic that one of Nicholson's recreations in his earlier years was the writing of light verse, and in 1911 he published a collection—under the title of *The Don and the Dervish*—of his contributions to the *Cambridge Review* and the *Granta*, together with some of his verse translations from the Arabic and Persian. If poetry in general is criticism of life, then humorous verse to be effective must definitely be so, in however restricted a sense. His own products in that line were too mild, too lacking in malice, to have the success of a Calverley in the specialized community amongst whom he dwelt. But they were topical and certainly appreciated in their time.

It may have been his predilection for the Cambridge way of life which decided him not to travel abroad to any great extent. He never visited Persia, Turkey, or the Arabic-speaking lands of the Middle East. Possibly it was of no great consequence. It was said of Theodor Nöldeke, perhaps the most learned of all Orientalists, that he had never been east of Vienna. In effect, the subjects to which both Nöldeke and Nicholson devoted themselves were such as could better be studied in the library

than in the field, being products of the mind in places greatly altered by the circumstances of history and seldom penetrated except by the most active inquirers into things as they are. In the Preface to the first edition (1907) of his *Literary History of the Arabs* Nicholson declared that the literary side of the subject appealed to him more than the historical, and that in his view Arabic poetry was, in the main, a true mirror of Arabian life. When, however, he tried to represent in his verse-translations the spirit and feeling of the original poems he found, as he says, that, 'even in those passages which seem best suited for the purpose we are baffled again and again by the intensely national stamp of the ideas, the strange local colour of the imagery, and the obstinately idiomatic style'.

One gathers from this remark that he felt the disadvantage of his unfamiliarity with the native haunts of his authors. In reality, however, only certain facets of life in the Arabic-speaking countries are pictured by such poetry as is available to us now. It allows us no more than occasional glimpses into the encampments of nomads in the wilds or into the courts of princes in the towns. Some later odes are mystical or religious, others historical or no more than panegyrics made to be sold to a patron; yet whatever its character or subject the greater part of the earliest Arabic poetry surviving to us owes its preservation to philologers and lexicographers anxious to find supporting texts for their definitions of obscure or archaic terms in the Qur'ān or the traditions of the Prophet. Consequently we have verses containing out-of-the-way technicalities culled from the language of camel-owners or sheep-breeders of a day long past as well as metrical compositions which are little more than verbal *tours de force*.

Nicholson was concerned with ideas rather with philology or annals. He availed himself with eagerness of the passages which had a common appeal and his renderings of those he selected—as they appear in the *Literary History of the Arabs* and his *Studies in Islamic Poetry* (1921)—are completely satisfying. The parts he cared less about he left to the cataloguers and compilers.

The story was a different one when it came to Islamic mysticism, or Ṣūfiism. There all was significant, and he cast his net wide. Introducing the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, a collection of Arabic mystical odes by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. A.D. 1240–1), he claims that those familiar with the mystical literature of both Arabs and Persians will allow that the Arabs excel in prose rather than in verse, while the Persian prose-

writers on the subject cannot be compared with the poets. As for the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*,

> the obscurity of its style and the strangeness of its imagery will satisfy those austere spirits for whom literature provides a refined form of intellectual exercise, but the sphere in which the author moves is too abstract and remote from common experience to give pleasure to others who do not share his visionary temper or have not themselves drawn inspiration from the same order of ideas. Nevertheless, the work of such a bold and subtle genius deserves, at any rate, to be studied.

Nicholson himself was one of the very few Oriental scholars competent to undertake the task.

Here it should be made clear that 'Islamic mysticism' is a convenient mode of rendering 'Ṣūfiism', but not altogether an accurate one. The doctrines of orthodox Islam have little concern with mysticism, which is contemptuous of forms and ritual, so that Ṣūfīs, who have numbered amongst themselves freethinkers and pantheists, have at times been regarded as pure heretics. Extensively the term 'Ṣūfiism' covers the sum total of theosophies believed in by individuals of a variety of races and tongues who outwardly professed Islam or wrote in the Arabic script, which is that of the Qur'ān.

Mysticism in general has been compared with alchemy as a product of the mind—and more specifically the medieval mind—in search of security; the one material, the other spiritual. In neither case was any royal road to the truth discovered, and there is, in fact, no Ṣūfī sect with a regular system of dogmas; the paths by which the Ṣūfīs have sought God 'are in number as the souls of men' and vary infinitely. The point is illustrated by Nicholson in the parable, cited from Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's *Mathnawī*, of the people who came to visit an elephant which some Hindus were exhibiting in a dark house. Each visitor felt the animal with his hand. One, taking hold of the trunk, said, 'This creature is like a water-pipe'; another, who touched its ear, declared that it appeared to him to resemble a fan, while a third, handling its leg, decided that the elephant had a shape like a column.

Nicholson was obviously aware of the difficulties in his chosen path of study, but this did not deter him from undertaking the vast amount of reading and research which it involved. In his *Mystics of Islam*—a manual for the general reader—published in 1914, he speaks of drawing to some extent on materials which he had collected during the past twenty years for 'a general history of Islamic mysticism—a subject so vast and many-sided

that several large volumes would be required to do it anything like justice'. During those twenty years he had published, in addition to three Arabic Reading Books and numerous articles in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* and elsewhere, a series of texts and translations intended to be materials for a history of Ṣūfiism. First came (in two volumes, 1905 and 1907) the Persian text of the *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā* ('Memoirs of the Saints'), containing the spiritual biographies of numerous Ṣūfī adepts. This was followed in 1911, firstly by the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, A Collection of (Arabic) Mystical Odes, by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī, together with a literal version of the text and an abridged translation of the author's commentary thereon; secondly by a translation of Hujwīrī's *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, The Oldest Persian Treatise on Ṣūfiism (2nd edition, 1936). In 1914 came a stout volume containing the Arabic text of the *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ fī'l-Taṣawwuf* by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. A.D. 988–9), together with critical notes, abstract of contents, glossary, and indexes. 'This volume', says Nicholson in his introduction, 'marks a further step in the tedious but indispensable task . . . of providing materials for a history of Ṣūfiism, and more especially for the study of its development in the oldest period. . . .'

In this connexion mention should be made of his article entitled: 'A historical enquiry concerning the origin and development of Ṣūfiism, with a list of definitions of the terms Ṣūfī and Taṣawwuf arranged chronologically', which appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* for 1906. In one of his notebooks, dated August 1907, a plan of volume i of a history of Ṣūfiism is outlined as follows: 1. The Ascetic Movement; 2. Beginnings of Ṣūfiism; 3. The Early Ṣūfīs; 4. Theosophy and Pantheism; 5. The Schools of Ṣūfiism and their Founders; 6. Ṣūfī Asceticism (*a*) Individual, (*b*) Social; 7. Ṣūfī Mysticism.

The materials he had published up to 1914 were comparatively early, and little worked upon. It remained for him to re-examine texts that were already well known but had been imperfectly studied and interpreted. *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (1921) are essays on important aspects of the subject, with a long chapter making intelligible the *Ta'iyyah* of Ibn al-Fāriḍ and the even more obscure translation of it by Hammer-Purgstall made in 1854. In 1905 came the first instalment of the text of the masterpiece of Ṣūfiism, the *Mathnawī-i Maʿnawī* ('The Mathnawī of the Spirit') of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. A.D. 1273). Obviously in any study of the subject the examination of this work would have had to play an important part. It had

been famous from the moment of its composition; manuscripts of it, and of commentaries upon it, were numerous, and it had often been printed or lithographed in the East. Yet in the course of its transmission it had become so overlaid by additions and corruptions that before the author's original thought could be laid bare a new edition of the text was necessary.

Nicholson planned a complete text and translation in six volumes, with three volumes of commentary and 'an introductory volume dealing with the life and times of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and with the linguistic, literary, historical, doctrinal, and other aspects of the poem as a whole'. It was an ambitious programme long present to his mind, and, except for the introductory volume, he achieved it all by a sustained effort rarely equalled and never surpassed. No one without his unique equipment of scholarship could have coped with Rūmī's unruly genius. It illumines the character of the achievement that some Persians felt it a reflection on their own people that it should have been left to a European and a non-Moslem to have edited and interpreted one of the profoundest works of Islam and, possibly, its greatest contribution to the world's corpus of religious literature. Nicholson's own view when summing up the work and genius of Rūmī was that his Odes, collected in the *Dīwāni Shamsi Tabrīz*, reached the utmost heights of which a poetry inspired by vision and rapture is capable and that these alone would have made him the unchallenged laureate of Mysticism. 'But', he said,

> 'they move in a world remote from ordinary experience, open to none but the "unveiled", whereas the *Mathnawī* is chiefly concerned with the problems and speculations bearing on the conduct, use and meaning of life. . . . Everyone can find something to his taste, from abstruse recondite theories of mystical philosophy to anecdotes of a certain kind, which are told in the plainest terms possible.'

The editing of a difficult text not far short of 26,000 lines in length, in a script which provides endless possibilities for copyist's errors, is in itself an immense task, physical and intellectual. Yet Nicholson was never content to regard as final what he had set down. As better materials became available to him in the course of his transcribing and editing he revised and corrected whole sections, running into thousands of lines. The translation —guided, of course, by the commentaries in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, as well as those in European languages—is an unsurpassable rendering of the original, in a style which has made it eagerly sought after even by people who have little

interest in orientalism but who find in the work food and illumination for their beliefs.

There is no sustained argument in the *Mathnawī*. The thought leaps abruptly from one point to another as fresh illustrations, parallels, objections, and what would appear to be odd irrelevancies occur to the author's mind, so that now and again he must recall himself to the subject in hand. In all this, there are frequent allusions to the details of ordinary workaday life, and it was here that Nicholson's lack of first-hand familiarity with the East caused him on rare occasions to miss the exact significance of a verse, albeit with no great harm done to the general sense. Also, from the nature of the case, the *Mathnawī* is not always *virginibus puerisque*, yet by his delicate recourse to the decent veil of Latin he contrived to make it so.

Of the commentary—in two volumes, finally, and not the three originally planned—it must suffice to say that it is an astonishingly rich storehouse filled with the accumulated reading of a lifetime. The last volume appeared in 1940 and with the publication of it Nicholson regarded his task, begun eighteen years before, as virtually complete. He still hoped to carry out his intention of writing a book which should be a summing up of Rūmī's life and work, and which would have formed incidentally, the Prolegomena to a history of Ṣūfiism. It did not, however, materialize. He may have considered that the time was not ripe even yet; that the mass of materials was still insufficient. In any event, all that is left in manuscript for such a work is an index of the materials available for its compilation.

Even so, the tasks completed by Nicholson during his lifetime have established his vast pre-eminence in the subject he made his own. It is safe to prophesy that for a century or more to come no European will hazard an attempt to equal his performance there—nor, indeed, will it be possible—and, wherever Islamic scholarship is pursued, his name will live admired and honoured.