ROBERT YELVERTON TYRRELL

1844-1914

Robert Yelverton Tyrrell was born at Ballingarry, co. Tipperary, in 1844. His father was the Rev. Henry Tyrrell, who afterwards was Rector of the pretty village of Kinnitty in the King's County. He was educated at a private school in Hume Street in Dublin. In 1860, when only sixteen, he entered Trinity College, obtaining First Entrance Prizes in Greek Verse, Latin Prose, and Latin Verse; and Second Prize in Greek Prose. In 1861 he obtained Classical Scholarships in his first year, a feat almost unheard of up to his time and certainly unheard of in a boy of seventeen. In 1864 he graduated as a double First (first of all in Classics and fourth in Logic and Ethics). In the same year he got the Vice-Chancellor's Prize in Greek Verse for a play on the subject of Hypatia, part of which he afterwards published. In 1868 he obtained Fellowship at the age of twenty-four on very brilliant answering in Classics. In 1871 he became Professor of Latin; in 1880 Regius Professor of Greek; in 1899 Senior Tutor and Public Orator; in 1904 Senior Fellow and Registrar. He obtained Honorary Degrees from the Queen's University of Ireland, Edinburgh (1884), Cambridge (1892), Oxford (1893), St. Andrews (1906), and Durham (1907). In 1901 he was chosen one of the first fifty members of the British Academy.

The influence which Tyrrell exercised on classical studies in his University cannot be overestimated. That influence was due, not only to his great gifts and cultivated insight into the beauties of thought and expression of the classical authors, but also to the intensity of his conviction that classical studies were the best training to make men effective and attractive in whatever walk of life they might adopt. His lectures—which were seldom regular set prelections, but were nearly always of the nature of joint investigations with his pupils, guided by a commanding and penetrating mind—will not readily be forgotten by those who had the privilege of attending them. His epigrammatic turn of mind and his independence of thought used to evolve criticisms on writers and commentators, which were at once pungent and illuminating. They used to pass from mouth to mouth, and led his hearers, or co-operators as he was fain to call them, to independence of thought and to avoid too overwhelming a subservience to the opinion of any scholar-hero of the moment. He had that most

excellent gift in a teacher of being able to put himself at the standpoint of his pupils; and he was always, when the present writer attended him, only too ready to give adequate words to any inchoate thought which any earnest pupil would advance, and, if it had anything in it, bring that out with commendation, and pass over in the kindest way possible its defective features. Such a teacher is of course more or less at the mercy of bores; but Tyrrell was able to suffer bores if not quite gladly, yet with urbanity (a quality which was a special note of his character), and he was generally able by some well-chosen but not unkindly word to prevent too much time being wasted on laborious and wholly useless argumentations. But with an interested and interesting pupil, such say as Ridgeway, he was ever ready for a discussion; and nothing could have been more instructive for the rest of us in the class, and indeed perhaps for the protagonists themselves, than such a clashing of independent minds. It can be gathered that Tyrrell's usual lectures (as distinguished from set prelections) were not by any means highly systematic performances; indeed, the present writer has sometimes wondered what would have been his fate if an education inspector of the present day had heard such desultory conversations (as they often might be termed) and discovered that perhaps not more than twenty lines had been got over in the day. But his influence on the minds of his pupils, fairly visible even in class, really came out in their private talks afterwards. For he created a real, not a mere examination, interest in the subjects he taught: and his clear, penetrating, and tersely-expressed criticisms and expositions struck home to us and became part and parcel of our own intellectual furniture. He arose in an age in Trinity College of somewhat ponderous learning: but along with his friends Dr. Ingram, Dr. Mahaffy, Dr. Dowden, and Mr. Arthur Palmer, he created a new spirit whereby a fresh and vivid feeling for literature in general and for classical antiquity in particular was awakened, even if some loss of old-world erudition was thereby sustained.

He first came to be known in England in 1867 by a little book of translations into Greek and Latin Verse which he called *Hesperidum Susurri*. He was twenty-three at the time and had not yet obtained Fellowship. It was the joint work of him and two friends, Mr. Brady and Mr. Cullinan. Tyrrell was the prime mover in the publication, and his translations in the volume are the more commanding and venturesome. His University had obtained no little fame across the water in Mathematics: and he was anxious to show that it had a Classical school also. The work was a small one, mere whispers beside the clear-toned music of the *Sabrinae Corolla* and the *Arundines Cami*:

but it was generously received and encouraged by English scholars; and a kindly recognition by Professor Jebb was, I believe, the beginning of a lifelong friendship which sprang up between those two congenial spirits. A short time after he had got Fellowship he started *Kottabos*, a College miscellany of Greek and Latin Verse, and of English pieces which were mostly light and graceful, parody being especially prominent. This miscellany flourished exceedingly during the twelve years of Tyrrell's editorship. One famous parody by Mr. R. F. Littledale called 'The Oxford Solar Myth' obtained world-wide reputation. But Tyrrell's own parodies of Herodotus ('Herodotus in Dublin'), of Aristotle ('On Smoking'), of Mommsen ('A monograph on the position of Balbus in Roman History'), and a series of notes supposed to have been written by eminent scholars of the seventies on the first line of the *Aeneid*, all brought the magazine and their author no little fame. The last indeed appear to have caused some temporary offence in some quarters—perhaps because the arrows had hit their mark. For as has been said (in the obituary notice in *Hermathena*) 'Tyrrell seems to have employed parody in the manner of Aristophanes, not only as something agreeable in itself, but as an effective instrument of criticism'. He believed implicitly that

Ridiculum acri
Fortius et melius magnas plerumque secat res,

and small things too. On one occasion, during an epidemic of proposals for creating new, especially scientific, societies in the University, when Tyrrell had himself been somewhat afflicted with proses which contained the most subtle subjunctives imaginable, he declared with great solemnity that he was going to found a Society for the suppression of Geology and the encouragement of the Indicative Mood. He never parodied the work of modern writers unless he thought it extravagant or was unduly and insincerely worshipped. His especial aversion in this respect was Robert Browning: and he was never tired of parodying him. Courage and sincerity were cardinal features of Tyrrell's character, especially as regards literary work: and no matter how high any writer stood in popular veneration, he never would bow the knee unless he was convinced that the veneration was rightly placed and sincerely felt.

He was at his best in translation, whether into Greek and Latin, or from those languages into English. He could feel at once the way the idea in question would have been expressed by a writer in the other language, as in the story of a challenge made to him to translate into a Latin Verse 'But look through Nature up to Nature's God',

with sure instinct he felt that *res* was the word for 'Nature' (*At res contemplans auctorem collige rerum*). In the writing of Greek and Latin Verses of every style from that of Homer to Walter Map, he no doubt had some superiors, but they were few. A good specimen of his translations into English is the long passage of Petronius in his *Latin Poetry*, pp. 276 ff. And he was nearly, if not quite, as good at literary criticism. His lectures delivered in America in 1893 at the Johns Hopkins University, which he subsequently published under the title of *Latin Poetry*, are delightful in their freshness and clearness; and in them he proved himself a worthy follower in the school of Sellar. His was all a literary mind: it was literature and scholarship that captivated him. In the side-studies (if one may call them so), such as investigation of manuscripts, archaeology, history, comparative philology, all those subjects which in his young days used to be called 'collaterals', he had little interest. He was not what would be deemed in the present day a learned man: and he was the first to acknowledge it himself. The laborious accumulation of everything that had been said on a subject was useful, but outside his tastes. Not that he despised even mere erudition: but he feared it in his own case. He feared it would tend to quench his natural insight. He admired those who cultivated wide fields of classical learning—if they cultivated them well: but it was a comparatively small field that claimed his affection. However, that field was indeed well tilled. It comprised only real classics: and he did most thoroughly know the text of his Homer, Pindar, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Plautus, Horace, Cicero's Epistles, and a very considerable amount of Shakespeare. They had become part of the very texture of his mind: and they were ever at hand for appropriate and delightful employment.

In 1871 he published his edition of the *Bacchae*, which was the result of three terms' lecturing to the First Year Honour Class in that play. It was subsequently incorporated in Macmillan's Classical Series. Euripides was at one time one of his favourite authors, and in 1881 he published an edition of the *Troades*, which reached a second edition three years later. In 1873 he and his former teacher, Dr. Ingram, then Regius Professor of Greek, were the main instruments in inaugurating *Hermathena*, which still survives as a witness to their enterprise. In 1879 he planned his edition of Cicero's Correspondence and issued the first volume. That edition was the main work of his life; and he was so far happy in his death that he saw several of the volumes in second editions and the work as a whole not yet superseded. He was led to this edition by his duty

(as Professor of Latin) of lecturing for several years both the Honour Degree and the Second Year Honour men in portions of the Correspondence. In 1880 he was made Regius Professor of Greek: and from that time all his lecturing in College was in Greek. Report said his lectures on Aristotle's Politics, on Sophocles, on Aeschylus, and above all on Pindar, were even superior to his lectures on Latin authors. However, he never published editions of any of those authors except a text of Sophocles which would perhaps have been more successful if it had been printed in more usual type. But he wrote able and interesting essays on Pindar and Sophocles (reprinted in 1909 among his *Essays in Greek Literature*) in the *Quarterly Review*, to which, as well as to the *Fortnightly*, he was a constant contributor. He also kept himself *au courant* with all the specially literary works which came to light from the papyri, and he contributed many emendations of difficult passages. He was a strong opponent of the view that the *Constitution of Athens* was the work of Aristotle. He greatly admired Bacchylides and wrote an attractive essay on that author with many felicitous translations of passages in his poems. Meanwhile he kept up his Latin studies. Greek and Latin studies should not be divorced even in a Professor of Greek was a view he always held. His work on Cicero was constant: and he kept running beside that no little work on Plautus, a writer in whom he took great delight. His edition of the *Miles Gloriosus* reached at least three editions and is a useful introduction to a special study of that author. In 1902 he edited Terence for the new series of Oxford Texts.

Tyrrell had a splendid constitution: but it is difficult to help feeling that he worked too hard when he was young, and lived too active and high-pitched an intellectual life, so that he was ill able to bear those periods which inevitably come when 'one's light is low, one's heart is sick and all the wheels of Being slow'. He used to play racquets and lawn-tennis, the latter till well over his fiftieth year, sometimes with too great vigour. It was in 1899 that, by a strain he suffered while playing lawn-tennis, he got thrombosis in one of his legs which spread to the other, with the result that he had a most tedious period of invalidism; and he never was quite himself again. He could not take his usual exercise, and it seemed as if he suddenly passed straight from being a young man to being an old one. He never seemed to the present writer to be able after that to keep up for a prolonged time his wonted high level of intellectual interest in any study; after an hour or two he would flag, but for short periods he was intellectually as vigorous as ever.

In 1899 he was made Senior Tutor, which necessitated his resigning the Professorship of Greek. He was also made Public Orator. He had officiated in the latter position seven years before with conspicuous success on the occasion of the Trinity College Tercentenary, the existing Public Orator at the time, Professor Arthur Palmer, being unable to act owing to illness in his family. In 1900 he succeeded Dr. Mahaffy (who had become a Senior Fellow) in the Chair of Ancient History, which he held till 1904, when he himself became a Senior Fellow: but the subject was not accordant with the especially literary bent of his genius. When he became a Senior Fellow in 1904 he was elected to the office of Registrar of the Board of the College, and for eight years he fulfilled efficiently the duties of that arduous post. He had one business habit of inestimable value: he never delayed answering ordinary business letters. As a member of the Board—indeed all through his life—he had the greatest sympathy with the Undergraduates and was almost invariably on their side in any dispute with the authorities, and he was deservedly most popular with them.

During the last few years of his life he was sorely tried. It was again his legs that troubled him, and a form of gangrene developed which not infrequently, as is stated by experts, attacks men of advancing years. For month upon month he used to be kept either in bed or sitting in a chair with his legs propped up: and whatever praise he deserved for his many other excellencies, no praise could be too great for the patience he displayed during all that dreary time. He did not suffer much actual pain: but the tedium of an inactive and wearying life to an active-minded man was very trying, though he was nursed with devoted care, which he never wearied of recognizing; as indeed he was always ready to recognize and show gratitude for any kindness. He died peacefully on the morning of September 19, 1914, in the seventy-first year of his age.

He took his fair share in the discussion of College business and in sitting on College Committees, especially when anything connected with the welfare of the Classical School was at stake. For a great number of years he was a representative of the Junior Fellows on the Academic Council. In public business outside College he took little part: but he was one of the Commissioners of Education in Ireland since 1881, and at the time of his death the senior member of that body. He did a good deal of examining for the Universities of London, Glasgow, New Zealand, and others, as well as for the Irish Intermediate Education Board: and for many years he was an examiner in Classics for the Indian Civil Service. He was a strong

Unionist, but did not take any active part in politics. He was a constant theatre-goer, and looked up to as a sound dramatic critic. He did not care at all for travelling: but he sometimes went to the near Continent, and once to America to lecture. His vacations he liked to spend at Greystones. When surprise was once expressed to him that a scholar so imbued with Greek feeling was not desirous of going to Greece, he said pleasantly, 'Well, you see, if I went there and found myself defrauded by a man called Aristides, it might spoil the illusion.'

He married in 1874 the eldest daughter of Dr. Shaw, one of his colleagues among the Fellows. He was singularly happy in his domestic life. He never worked after dinner: he liked to have that period of the day with his family. No household could have been brighter than his: and at no house was a visitor ever made more welcome. He had (as the saying is) a genius for friendship: his friends were many, perhaps the dearest of all was Henry Butcher. As a conversationalist Tyrrell had few compeers. People with literary tastes naturally gravitated to his house, where at times the arrows of discussion would fly about, until the master-bowman, he, would cleave the mark with some admirably terse saying, especially on any literary subject. For literature and scholarship were what he most valued and admired: ordinary worldly things, wealth and position, were good no doubt and he supposed necessary, but of less weight and not of the positive essence of life. This was his feeling to the very end. Last summer, at the wedding of one of his daughters, he said to a guest, 'I am certainly most fortunate in my sons-in-law. All three of them are fond of literature and very good scholars too.' They had other excellencies, on which he might have congratulated himself; but those in his eyes were the chief and the most essential.

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