



JOHN HENRY MUIRHEAD

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1855-1940

JOHN HENRY MUIRHEAD, born at Glasgow on 28 April 1855, was the third son of J. W. Muirhead and Mary Burns, who claimed a connexion, which I have not been able to establish, with Susan Ferrier, the novelist. His father was a lawyer, who died before John was three years old. His mother then moved with her four sons to Hamilton, returning to Glasgow some seven years later in order to secure a good education for the boys.

Of his three brothers the eldest, James, became a lawyer and succeeded to his father's business; the second son, Islay, became a doctor, and the fourth, Lewis, took orders in the Church of Scotland. All four were educated at the Glasgow Academy, and John went on from it to the University, where he graduated in 1876.

A year previous to graduation he had obtained the Snell Exhibition which brought him to Balliol College, Oxford. He obtained a first class in Honours Classical Moderations and then, like some other distinguished Balliol scholars (R. L. Nettleship is a famous example), to the surprise of his tutors, the college, and perhaps himself, failed to obtain a First in Greats, being placed in the Second Class, in 1879. He had already been *proxime accessit* for the Gaisford Prize (Prose) and as a B.A. won the Chancellor's Latin Essay Prize, when the subject was 'The ancient system of Imperial Government'.

Muirhead as an undergraduate was one of a brilliant set, four of whom, (Sir) Henry Jones, J. S. Mackenzie, John MacCunn, and W. P. Ker, became intimate and lifelong friends, and each of whom subsequently, like Muirhead himself, achieved distinction in a professorial chair. Amongst the intellectual influences which moulded his views of life must be reckoned the Master, Jowett, T. H.

Green, Nettleship, and Edward Caird. Strands of Green's thought can be traced through all Muirhead's life and work, but the former's premature death (1882) made that influence less potent than it would have been in the formative period from 1879 to 1890. Unquestionably, Edward Caird was for Muirhead his most inspiring master of living teachers: and Caird's idealist metaphysics, as Muirhead more than once said to myself, were 'the true interpretation of the real Hegel'. It was to him later a labour of love to co-operate with Sir Henry Jones in the biography of a philosopher whom he loved and revered (1921). In 1879 he had not definitely turned to philosophy as the profession of his life, and, as he did not obtain a Fellowship, for the next six years he was assistant in the department of the Humanities (i.e. Latin) at Glasgow, under Professor Ramsay. But neither the classical languages nor literature could satisfy Muirhead's developing mind nor answer the questions which more and more insistently demanded a constructive reply. So in 1885 he left Glasgow to study philosophy and theology at Manchester New College. That year, therefore, marks a personal decision that philosophy was to be his business both as a teacher and as a seeker after 'the good and the right life'.

In 1888 he became Lecturer in Mental and Moral Science at the newly founded Royal Holloway College at Egham, while he lectured also at Bedford College and for the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching. Extra-mural university education, as we term it to-day, found in the young philosopher of thirty-three a recruit, whose convictions and loyalty to the cause deepened with every year of his life. In the same year he became Editor of the *Library of Philosophy* (published first by Swan Sonnenschein and then by Allen & Unwin), a position which he retained for fifty-two years and which was only terminated by his death, and one which brought him into active and continuous relations with philosophers of all schools and from many countries, and gave full scope both to his critical

powers and to his gift for inspiring the best work even more in those whose views he did not share than in those with whom he broadly agreed. Another landmark can be noted in 1891, when with James Bonar and others he founded 'The Ethical Society', of which he was for many years the secretary. His first book, *The Elements of Ethics* (1892), had a wide sale, so that he was well known to the general public when in 1896 he was appointed Professor of Philosophy and Political Economy in the Mason University College at Birmingham. The City and University were to provide the young Professor precisely with the field of work that would give full scope to his intellectual powers, his personality, and his ideals, and he arrived at a critical period in the history of the College, when debate both within and without its walls was being fiercely concentrated on the future of the institution. Was it to remain simply an extended college, whose students could only take the external degrees of London, or was it to become a university—the first unitary and provincial university? Muirhead had an influential part in bringing about, with the powerful aid of Joseph Chamberlain, the creation by Royal Charter of the University of Birmingham in 1900, in which he remained until he retired in 1922. With the establishment of the first Faculty of Commerce and Economics in Great Britain (1901), political economy was, to his relief, severed from philosophy and properly assigned to the new Faculty: so that the Professor of Philosophy was free to make of his department what he pleased.

I did not get to know him well until I went to Birmingham at the end of 1919, but I discovered very soon the position that he had built up for himself and his subject by the end of the War. His main interest was in ethics—the study of the principles of conduct as the basis of the good life and the practical application of those principles to the life of the individual citizen and above all to the life of organized communities. I am not concerned in this brief biographical notice with Muirhead as a philosopher, in the

technical sense, but his influence on the City of Birmingham and on the civic communities of the Midlands was both deep and far-reaching, for he brought home literally to tens of thousands two vitalizing truths: first, that ethics as a branch of philosophy had reasoned answers to the fundamental questions that practical citizenship must ask, and, secondly, that citizenship in practice would deepen and widen the reasoned answers of scientific ethics. In other words moral science covered all the creative activities of life and ought to be the affair of every man and woman, alike as individuals and as members of an organic and organized whole. Muirhead, in fact, made himself an invaluable liaison officer between the academic classroom and the professorial chair as the developing organ of the higher humanist studies and the industrial and social life of Birmingham and the Midlands. His simplicity, sincerity, and deep moral enthusiasm, which were always grappling with the realization in practice of the principles for which he stood, made him revered as a teacher, valued as the counsellor, and loved as the friend. His retirement in 1922 was felt to be even more a loss to the City than it was to the University.

Retaining physical and mental vigour, Muirhead paid two visits to the United States (in 1923, and for the three years, 1925-8) in which he held special positions as a lecturer and visiting professor in the Universities of California (Berkeley and Los Angeles); and it was in this second visit, in 1927, that he married his second wife, Pauline Bailey. He had married, in 1892, his first wife, Mary Talbot Wallas, a sister of the well-known political and social philosopher, Graham Wallas, a woman of marked artistic gifts. Her health broke down in 1911, and those who were privileged to be intimate friends retain an indelible impression of the tender devotion with which her husband helped her to face the ordeal of eleven trying years until her death in 1922. There were no children from either marriage.

As chairman of the Council of the British Institute of Philosophy, as Editor of the *Library of Philosophy*, and in

numerous other ways Muirhead maintained until his death on 24 May 1940 a vivid and vivifying interest in all the movements of philosophical thought, of numerous social organizations, and of adult education, and one of the last communications that I had from him was a short pamphlet (printed, I think, for private circulation) in which he repudiated with indignant emphasis and a closely knitted argument the popular indictment that the Nazi creed was the logical development of the principles of Hegel.

His contribution over a long life to philosophy will be assessed by a more competent hand than mine, but his services to the University and City of Birmingham will be long and gratefully remembered.

CHARLES GRANT ROBERTSON

It will perhaps be convenient to begin the brief account which I propose to offer of Muirhead as a philosopher by giving a chronological list of his books; I will not attempt a list of his very numerous articles in *Mind*, the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, the *Journal of Ethics*, *Philosophy*, the *Hibbert Journal*, the *Fortnightly*, and the *Contemporary*.

Letters of Cicero, selected and edited with introduction and notes, 1885.

Elements of Ethics, 1892.

Translation of Zeller's *Aristotle and the Earlier Peripatetics* (with B. F. C. Costelloe), 1897.

Chapters from Aristotle's Ethics, 1900.

Philosophy and Life, and other Essays, 1902.

The Service of the State, 1908.

By What Authority: the Principles in Common and at Issue in the Reports of the Commission on the Poor Law, 1909.

Nine Famous Birmingham Men (ed., with contribution), 1909.

Birmingham Institutions (ed., with contribution), 1911.

German Philosophy in Relation to the War, 1915.

Social Purpose (with H. J. W. Hetherington), 1918.

The Life and Philosophy of Edward Caird (with Sir Henry Jones), 1921.

Contemporary British Philosophy (ed., with contributions), 1924 and 1926.

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Science and Philology, and Other Essays (ed., with R. C. Bosanquet),
 1927.
The Use of Philosophy, 1928.
Coleridge as Philosopher, 1930.
The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy, 1931.
Rule and End in Morals, 1932.
Bernard Bosanquet and His Friends, 1935.
The Man versus the State as a Present Issue, 1939.

Muirhead first became generally known by his *Elements of Ethics*, which was at once greeted as one of the best general introductions to the subject, and has been much used for that purpose ever since; it passed into its fourth edition as recently as 1932. In it he pointed out clearly—more clearly, perhaps, than any earlier writer—that the two leading conceptions of ethics are that of end or good and that of rule or obligation, and that the main problem of ethics is to state correctly the relations between the two. He himself decided unambiguously in favour of end as the fundamental conception by reference to which the other has to be understood. To this same theme he returned in the last of his original contributions to philosophy—*Rule and End in Morals*—in which he reaffirmed his original thesis, and enriched his treatment of it by an interesting study of some of the discussions that had appeared since the writing of *Elements of Ethics*, in books and articles by Moore, Rashdall, Joseph, Prichard, Carritt, and Ross. This book is very striking evidence of the freshness of mind, and interest in whatever was happening in philosophy, which Muirhead retained to the end of his life; anyone might well be proud to be capable of writing such a book at the age of seventy-seven.

In thus emphasizing end or good as the primary conception of ethics, Muirhead was following in the footsteps of Plato and Aristotle; and the list of books given above shows how great was his interest in these two philosophers. The other main influence on his thinking came from the idealists of the generation before his own—Green, Caird,

Bradley, and Bosanquet; after the death of the last of these he was the chief remaining representative of the British school of idealists. Green and Caird, his own teachers, were those to whose philosophy his own was most akin; but we owe to him the valuable collection of Bosanquet's letters, and one of the most careful studies of Bradley's philosophy. With Green and Bosanquet he shared a deep interest in political philosophy, an interest shown in more than one of the books named above. In *The Service of the State* he expounded Green's theory, and in *Social Purpose* he examined more independently the foundations of political obligation. With Green and Bosanquet, too, he shared a great practical interest in social reform; of this the chief literary evidence is his book on the findings of the Poor Law Commission.

Of all his books, that on Coleridge and that on the Platonic tradition in English and American Philosophy embody the greatest amount of original research. The former book is based largely on study of an important manuscript by Coleridge discovered by Muirhead in the British Museum; the book gives the fullest and best account that we have of Coleridge's philosophy. The object of the second book is to show that British idealism of the nineteenth century did not spring entirely from German sources but was continuous with the Platonic tradition carried on by such writers as Cudworth, Norris of Bemerton, and Collier; and, if anything, Muirhead tends rather to over-emphasize this continuity. The most important part of the book is an elaborate study of Bradley's metaphysics.

While Muirhead belonged very definitely to the idealistic school, he had a most hospitable and sympathetic mind. This fitted him peculiarly for editing the *Library of Philosophy*, as he did from its inception in 1888 to his death. In this capacity he introduced to English readers not only many important native works, from *Appearance and Reality* downwards, but also translations of works by Bergson, Meyerson, Husserl, and many another famous foreign philosopher.

The same quality of mind was shown in his editing of *Contemporary British Philosophy*, a series of most interesting short statements of their views by most of the noteworthy British philosophers of the day. In his contributions to these volumes Muirhead most characteristically went to the limit in his endeavour to find traces of underlying unity between the most varying philosophical views.

One other of his activities must be mentioned. In 1929 he became Chairman of the British Institute of Philosophy, and to its interests he devoted himself untiringly. As Chairman of the Council he inspired his colleagues with a lively sense of the important work the Institute was trying to do in promoting a wider knowledge of philosophy; and the unselfish way in which he placed himself at the service of the staff in carrying out the Institute's work is remembered by them with gratitude. In addition to presiding at many public meetings of the Institute he gave during his chairmanship two courses of lectures, and contributed freely to *Philosophy*. The outstanding characteristic of his chairmanship was his wide sympathy with divergent points of view, both on philosophical and on administrative matters. He always tried to do justice to these different, and sometimes contradictory, positions, and sought to bring about co-operation wherever it was possible to do so.

By surviving Alexander, Muirhead became the most venerable figure among British philosophers; and like Alexander he was held in the highest respect and the warmest affection by many who differed completely from him in their philosophical views; his manifest friendliness and his readiness to find good wherever it could be found made him universally beloved.

W. D. Ross