

EDWARD JAMES RAPSON

1861-1937

EDWARD JAMES RAPSON was born on the 12th of May 1861 in Leicester. His father, Edward Rapson, moved a few years later from Leicester to Ledbury, where he opened a school; he then took Holy Orders, becoming in 1878 a deacon and in 1879 receiving ordination from the Bishop of Worcester, and after holding a curacy until 1880 at Bishop Ryder's Church in Birmingham and another from 1880 until 1888 in Pennherd, Somerset, was appointed in the latter year Vicar of West Bradley, likewise in Somerset. The younger Edward received most of his youthful training in Hereford Cathedral School, and distinguished himself there. His early years were thus passed in an atmosphere of earnest and cultured religion that left a lifelong impression upon his character, which was marked by a noble reverence for sacred things no less than by a thoroughly English manliness of outlook. His school likewise trained him in music, and he became an accomplished singer and executant, retaining his interest in the art until the end of his life.

Every college in our ancient universities which is worthy of the name has a character of its own, a *genius loci*; and so by virtue of a natural affinity young Rapson went up from Hereford to St. John's College, Cambridge. He entered into residence on the 4th of October 1879 as a pensioner, holding a Duchess of Somerset's Exhibition from Hereford School; he was admitted in June 1880 to a sizarship, which he held for two years, and then in 1883 was promoted to a Classical Foundation Scholarship, which continued until 1887. In 1883 he gained a First Class in the Classical Tripos. Cambridge tradition rightly considers a sound classical training to be the best propaedeutic for Oriental studies; and thus it was natural for him now to turn his energies towards Eastern studies. He read for the Indian

Languages Tripos, under the guidance of that great *maestro di color che sanno*, Edward Cowell, and in 1885 passed it with the same distinction as he had won in classics, taking as his subjects Sanskrit and Comparative Philology. Some minor successes fell to his lot during this period, for in 1884 the Brotherton Prize for Sanskrit was awarded to him, and in 1885 he was elected to the Hutchinson Studentship; and in 1886 an essay on *The Struggle between England and France for Supremacy in India* gained for him the Le Bas Prize, the earliest laurels gathered by him in the service of Clio. His academic honours duly culminated in a Fellowship in his college, to which he was elected on the 8th of November 1887, holding it until 1893.

A short term of service as Assistant Librarian to the Indian Institute in Oxford, under Professor Sir Monier Monier-Williams, was the prelude to the first of the two long periods of office in which the rest of his life was spent. On the 21st of December 1887 he entered the service of the Trustees of the British Museum as an Assistant in the Department of Coins and Medals. It was a post for which nature had perfectly fitted him. Numismatics is an exact science which demands strictest accuracy, most patient observation, and many-sided learning; and it rewards its faithful votaries by guiding them to important historical discoveries. The study of the Indian coins in the British Museum's rich collections, which henceforth was Rapson's special province, is peculiarly complicated because of the vast variety of the scripts in which their legends are stamped. The native scripts of India (excluding the still undeciphered writing on the tablets from the prehistoric cities in the Indus Valley) are all descended from two types, both of them adapted from Semitic alphabets: one of these is the *Brāhmī*, which first appears in the Mauryan inscriptions of the third century B.C., and the other is the *Kharoṣṭhī*, which may have been introduced somewhat later. The *Kharoṣṭhī* was restricted to the North, and despite local variations it proved sterile, for it has had no descendants;

the Brāhmī, on the other hand, was amazingly prolific, its manifold offshoots having spread over the whole of India and many adjoining lands in infinite multiplicity of forms varying from kingdom to kingdom and from century to century. For such a study Rapson was supremely well qualified by an intellect of mathematical precision, an indomitable industry, and a scholarship moulded by the best classical discipline and constantly enlarging its scope by new reading. He was, moreover, fortunate in the colleagues whom he found in the Department when he entered it—Reginald Stuart Poole, the Keeper, Barclay Head, the Assistant Keeper, and the two First Class Assistants, H. A. Grueber and Warwick Wroth, joined in 1893 by George (now Sir George) Hill—sound scholars all, who faithfully nourished the fine tradition of learning which had descended to them. In these happy surroundings Rapson thrived apace. He soon began to make his mark by his writings, chiefly in the *Numismatic Chronicle* and the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. In the latter he published between 1890 and 1905 seventeen essays on numismatics and kindred subjects, including a remarkably illuminative series of six papers on *Indian Coins and Seals*, which appeared in 1900–5. In less than ten years he had come to be recognized as the first authority on his subject in Europe, and Georg Bühler entrusted to him the task of dealing with it in the great *Grundriss der indo-arischen Philologie* which he was then beginning to edit. Rapson accordingly wrote his *Indian Coins*, which appeared in the *Grundriss* (Band II, Heft 3 B) in 1898. It is a small book, comprising only 38 pages of text and 5 of plates; but it is a masterpiece of its kind, surveying the whole known field with perfect orderliness, lucidity, and precision, and establishing a cosmos of knowledge in a field where hitherto there had been comparatively little certainty and less synthesis.

While thus perfecting his mastery of Indian numismatics, palaeography, and history, he continued to enlarge his Sanskrit reading, and gained considerable experience in

private teaching. When after the death of Cowell in 1903 Cecil Bendall was elected to succeed him in the Chair of Sanskrit at Cambridge, Rapson was naturally and fittingly appointed to the Chair in University College, London, which hitherto had been held by Bendall. Meanwhile, he had embarked upon a study which was destined to carry him far in the domain of original research. On the 29th of May 1900 Sir Aurel Stein (then Dr. Marc Aurel Stein) had set out on the first of his epoch-making journeys through Chinese Turkestan, which disclosed the beauty of the art and the vigour of the literary culture that had flourished in those lands in early centuries. In January 1901 he had discovered buried in the desert at Niya a large number of official documents written on wood and leather in the Kharoṣṭhī script, and hence assignable to the first century of our era or thereabouts; and this collection was increased by later finds elsewhere. To Rapson was entrusted the task of studying and editing them. It was no light labour. The documents, mostly coming from Government archives, are couched in a rude and curious Northern Prakrit dialect, a forlorn niece of Sanskrit, with some intermixture of the native speech of Turkestan, and the Kharoṣṭhī characters in which they are written show some puzzling variations from the types of the script hitherto known. Rapson, however, set to work with his usual quiet energy, and in 1905 presented to the world the first-fruits of his studies in a penetrating article *On the Alphabet of the Kharoṣṭhī Documents* which was published in the first volume of the *Actes* of the Fourteenth International Congress of Orientalists. Thus he laid sure foundations for a future work of massive scholarship, of which the first instalment was not published until fifteen years later.

Of the leisure that was left to him after official duties and private study during these years in London a considerable part was devoted to music. Nature and his early schooling in Hereford had made him an accomplished musician: he had an excellent and well-trained tenor voice, which was

often heard in amateur choirs, and he was a skilful organist and pianist. While living in London he served as organist in two churches, and was very active and successful in choir-training. In his musical tastes, though he was no bigoted conservative, he was not catholic (perhaps no true musician is): he heartily disliked the cult of blatant ugliness and perverted ingenuity which is rampant in the so-called music of modernism. One who knew him very intimately in private life has written to me that 'the restlessness of very modern music worried and annoyed him, and he much lamented the passing of the true pure voice and the present almost universal vibrato singing'. It was natural that the first place in his affections should be held by Handel, whose classic purity and robust lucidity appealed most strongly to Rapson's typically English temper, and that after Handel he should have loved best Bach and Beethoven, two masters whose very different characters complement one another. Perhaps, too, it was the influence of Hereford days that moved him to take an interest in architecture, especially in that of the cathedrals of England and the Continent, many of which he studied with care.

In 1902 he married Ellen Daisy Allen, daughter of William Allen, of 'The House', in West Bradley. It was a singularly happy union, for she was a woman of fine culture and grace of spirit; and although unfortunately she passed many years of her married life, ending with her death on the 26th of March 1921, under the shadow of bodily infirmity, she was throughout warmly interested in his studies, in which she rendered him much help, besides presiding over the household with all the charm of the perfect hostess, as his Cambridge friends and pupils have attested.

In 1906, after long sickness, Bendall died, and the Chair of Sanskrit in Cambridge became vacant. Rapson was elected to succeed him, and held the post until his retirement last year. As a professor Rapson was successful not less than as a scholar. Our ancient universities, the treasure-houses of the garnered experiences of the ages, draw much

of their vitality from alternate systole and diastole: the Alma Mater takes the young alumni to her breast, trains them in her wise old traditions, sends forth the most of them into the world, and then takes back a chosen few, to bring into the channels of academic thought wholesome currents from the life without. Such a one was Rapson. Vigorously manly, practically wise, untiring in good works, genially sympathetic, equally truthful and tactful, he soon became through his *fides et ingeni benigna vena* one of the best-loved and most honoured personalities in Cambridge life. In academic administration and deliberation he was admirably successful. As a teacher he restored the high tradition of his master Cowell. His Chair was not one that could attract a large number of disciples; but among those who came to him were some men of the best quality, and to every one who sought instruction from him he devoted the most scrupulous care. He took great pleasure in teaching, and, like the Buddha, would vary his methods according to the capacity and inclination of his students.

Thus happily established in Cambridge, he finished a work on an important section of the British Museum's coin-collections which had been engaging his attention for many years, the *Catalogue of the Coins of the Andhra Dynasty, the Western Kṣatrapas, the Traikūṭaka Dynasty and the 'Bodhi' Dynasty*. This was published by the Trustees in 1908. The volume comprises, besides the 'Catalogue' proper (268 pages) and 21 plates, an introduction of 208 pages. It is somewhat unfortunate that such publications of the British Museum should bear the title of 'Catalogue', which to the man in the street (and possibly also to some superior minds) suggests mechanical workmanship. Really these 'Catalogues' are highly scientific descriptions and studies, and Rapson's work is one of the finest of the kind. The 'Andhras' and Western Kṣatrapas were dynasties of exceeding importance, and Rapson's classification of the coins issued by them and the other families was epoch-making. The long introduction, in which he constructed

from his researches the history of these dynasties, became at once a classic. As far as I am aware, there are only two small points in the work that are open to criticism. The first is in the title: as Rapson himself well knew, 'Andhra' is a misleading name given in the Purāṇas to the Sātavāhana dynasty owing to their conquest of the 'Andhra' land, the modern Telingana, at a rather late date in their history, and hence applying with about as much fitness as if one were to style the Plantagenets 'Cambrians' because of the conquest of Wales by Edward I. The second concerns the reproductions of the Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī legends on the coins: these were made from Rapson's eye-copies, and in his eye-copies he seldom attained perfect objectivity, for as a rule they unconsciously reveal something of the *ductus* of his handwriting. *Sed haec minuta sunt.*

After six more years of quiet teaching and study he published his *Ancient India from the Earliest Times to the First Century A.D.* (Cambridge, 1914), a book of modest size and scope, but eminently sound and useful; for its 198 duodecimo pages, with the excellent plates accompanying them, accurately and lucidly summarize all the essential features of Indian history and culture that were known with certainty at the time of writing. Though addressed to non-specialists, it has a permanent value as a work of scholarship. Then the Great War burst upon us. Like many other great-hearted gentlemen in like estate, Rapson resolved to take his share in the task of national defence. In earlier years he had served in the Officers' Training Corps, and now he joined the platoon of O.T.C. veterans formed in Cambridge, where he became a highly efficient and energetic drill-sergeant. In 1915 he took a commission and went to Falmouth, where he instructed a company, and then after some time returned to Cambridge, where he served until 1918 at the Head-quarters of the 2nd Cambridgeshire Regiment as Assistant Adjutant. The War over, he resumed pacific functions with renewed energy, and soon had the pleasure of finishing the first part of a

great work which had occupied a considerable part of his time during twenty years. In 1920 was published by the Clarendon Press the first volume of *Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions Discovered by Sir M. A. Stein in Chinese Turkestan*, edited by him in collaboration with the Abbé A. M. Boyer and M. E. Senart. Volume ii, with the same editors, did not appear until 1927, and it was followed in 1929 by volume iii, edited by Rapson and his pupil Professor P. Noble. In these pages are transliterated with scholarly care and skill 764 manuscripts unearthed in Sinkiang, mostly from the archives of administrators of that land in far-off ages, together with plates, appendices treating of the historical data derived from them, and an index of the vocabulary of their uncouth jargon, which had arisen out of the Northern Indian dialect imported into the Government offices of these regions, apparently by the Kuṣāṇa Emperors, and there mixed with local speech. These documents furnish the hitherto almost blank annals of the country with the names of six previously unknown kings, Avijita Siṃha of Khotan and Papiya, Tajaka, Aṃgoka, Mahiri, and Vaṣmana of Kroraṃna (Shan-shan), whose titles are obviously modelled on those of the great Kuṣāṇas who preceded them there. But the material edited by Rapson and his collaborators is not limited to official documents: it embraces also manuscripts of literary nature, for in the collection are included several religious and moral poems. Most of these are couched in a vulgar and highly incorrect form of Sanskrit similar to the 'Gāthā dialect' familiar in Northern Buddhist literature, and one of these is closely parallel to a passage in the Pali Dhammapada; but another manuscript contains a poem in more or less normal though not strictly correct Sanskrit. Thus a new field was opened in Indian dialectology; valuable material was furnished for the study of the local speech of Eastern Turkestan, its social conditions, its culture, and its history; and a new page was added to the record of the diffusion of Buddhist literature.

The execution of his last and most spacious literary undertaking, the task of editing and in part writing a *Cambridge History of India*, had been interrupted by the Great War. The first volume, comprising 26 chapters by divers authors, was practically ready for printing in 1913, and the Cambridge University Press had set up more than half of it when the War broke out and called a halt to the work. After peace had come back, Rapson resumed his labours, finished and revised the chapters, and at last in 1922 had the satisfaction of seeing the book published. It covers the early period down to the Śaka and Parthian invasions; and Rapson himself contributed to it five admirable chapters, the second, on the peoples and languages of India and the sources of Indian history, the thirteenth, on the Purāṇas, the twenty-first, on the native states of India after the Mauryan empire, the twenty-second, on the successors of Alexander the Great in India, and the twenty-third, on the invasions of the Scythians and Parthians. The production of this fine volume gave full scope to his talents, which combined solid erudition with minute accuracy in details and sternly critical judgement, enabling him not only to write his own chapters but also to weld together the contributions of others with them, as far as was possible, in a harmonious whole. He spared himself no pains in his editorial duties, verifying all references, checking all statements in the light of subsequent discoveries, and labouring to reduce to consistency the sometimes discrepant outlook of different collaborators. His energy carried him successfully through the first volume; but the difficulties of the second proved insuperable to him, and at length after prolonged struggles he surrendered the task of editing it in June 1937 to Sir Richard Burn, who now has it in hand. A certain measure of ill luck has dogged the course of the enterprise from the beginning and laid various *lapides offensionis* in its path. First came the War, which delayed it for eight years. Then came the disconcerting fact that soon after the publication of this first

volume the archaeologists of the Indian Government unearthed at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa the evidences of the marvellous prehistoric civilization of the Indus Valley, a brilliant culture that had reached its acme before the middle of the third millennium B.C., so that its discovery to a great extent threw out of focus all our previous views of the early history of India. Finally Sir Wolseley Haig, who had undertaken the editorship of the third and fourth volumes, was compelled by failing health to surrender his task after the publication of volume iii in 1928, and it was not until the present year (1937) that volume iv, completed and edited by Sir Richard Burn, issued from the press.

More years quietly passed by, and his seventieth birthday approached. It was an occasion that called for fitting recognition, and received it. Thanks to the kindness of the Director of the London School of Oriental Studies, a special number of the School's Bulletin was dedicated to him and made up of papers on Indian and cognate studies by 33 friends and pupils. This was presented to him with due ceremony on the 12th of May 1931, his natal day, in the Library of the old London Institution, then tenanted by the School (alas, its place knoweth it no longer); and Rapson acknowledged the gift in a charming speech, in which with characteristic modesty he said very little about himself and much about his teacher Cowell.

As time went on he found it needful for the sake of his health to slacken somewhat the tempo of his labours, and at length in 1936 he resigned his Chair, in which he was succeeded by Dr. H. W. Bailey, of the School of Oriental Studies. But to the last he remained loyal to his interests in scholarship, music, and literature. At the Annual Meeting of the British Academy held in May 1937 he was present and took an active part, apparently enjoying comparatively vigorous health. But from time to time disquieting symptoms began to show themselves in ominous warning. The end came with startling suddenness. During

the evening of Sunday, the 3rd of October 1937, while dining at the high table in his college, he swooned, and after about an hour died without recovering consciousness. The medical verdict ascribed death to cerebral haemorrhage.

Rapson's position in the world of learning is somewhat peculiar. For thirty-three years he was active as a Professor of Sanskrit; yet his chief claims to honour rest upon his achievements in other fields. His work on the Kharoṣṭhī documents lies to a large extent outside the domain of Sanskrit studies, though it is intimately related to it and in part intersects it, while it is of extraordinary importance for the study of Indo-Aryan dialectology and Buddhist culture. He was a good Sanskritist, but not a great one, as was his beloved master Cowell. He could not fully share the βαθύφρων μέριμνα, the profound and sympathetic interest in the inner workings of the Hindu spirit which inspired Cowell: he did not take delight, as Cowell did, in unravelling the intricacies of Indian scholastic thought or in unveiling the allusive and elusive charm of Sanskrit poetry. Cowell was great as a humanist, a φιλόλογος (in the classical sense of the word), and an intellectualist. Rapson was great as a master of historical science, beginning with numismatics and palaeography and culminating in historiography. Both men rendered noble service to the cause of knowledge; but they rendered it in different ways.

Some scholars live on lonely heights, and have little or no influence upon the men of their generation through personal touch. But others there are who have a vital significance as men among men no less than as truth-seekers, who teach the ways of knowledge as much by the power of human sympathy and the law of kindness as by exercise of intellect, and whose society is in itself a gracious inspiration to friends and pupils. Such a man was Edward Rapson. Strict scholarship in him united with self-sacrificing kindness, wholesome humanity incapable of meanness or

bitterness, unflinching devotion to duty, warm delight in art and literature, and deep reverence for religion, to form a character of rare harmony. His was a rich and full nature, and his death has left the world much the poorer. *Vale anima candida.*

L. D. BARNETT