

EDWARD ARMSTRONG

1846-1928

THERE is a model for any one who would write in memory of Edward Armstrong, in the words he himself wrote of Edward Moore for the *Proceedings* of the British Academy, of which they both were distinguished members. In the *Proceedings*, vol. vii, is the record of the life and learning of the eminent Dantist : appreciative, sympathetic, and candid. Thus should Armstrong be commemorated : the distinction of the subject must excuse the inadequacy of the attempt. He was a many-sided man, the width of whose learning was equalled by the charm of his personal character.

Edward Armstrong was born at Tidenham Vicarage on March 3, 1846, the second son of John Armstrong, then a country parson, afterwards Bishop of Grahamstown. The Bishop died when his son was ten years old, but meanwhile they had travelled together over much of Kafirland, and the boy had been at St. Andrew's College, Grahamstown. He retained vivid memories of South Africa all his life. His mother was Frances Whitmore. She lived till 1908 at Iffley, with her daughter, a delightful artist—a mile or so from her son, who was devoted to her and was never so happy as when presenting to her his friends, who never failed to admire the wisdom and vivacity which she retained till a great age. One of her reminiscences was of a dinner with Sydney Smith, who thus described a personage he had known : 'the man's face was like a whole vintage of *clar't*.' Bishop Armstrong was an 'old-fashioned High Churchman', perhaps not definitely a Tractarian. His son followed him in loyalty to the Church of his baptism. Almost to the last he rarely missed attendance in the College at 'morning chapel'. Conspicuously a layman himself, he was as much at home with clergy as with laymen : he was at home with almost all types among them.

not least with his neighbour the broad-minded ascetic Richard Meux Benson. What Mr. Humphrey Paul said of John Keble was equally true of him : 'There are some men for whom the Church of England is too large and others for whom it is too small. It was exactly the right size for Mr. Keble.'

His first wife, a lady of singular beauty, was an ardent worker in charity and religion : he put on her grave the beautiful words, *In simplicitate cordis quaesivit Deum*. His second wife, who made his last years so happy, was a clergyman's daughter.

But a thorough layman was he : mixing freely with all sorts and conditions of men. It is of his learning and scholarship, and his wisdom as a man of affairs, that we are specially to speak ; but that would give a very inadequate picture of him which did not recall on what terms of unbroken friendliness he lived with those 'in the world's eye' beneath him. You could see in their faces what a pleasure it was to servants to do anything for him, and all those who in different capacities assisted him in his College and those who waited upon him at home, cooks, 'scouts', gardeners, housemaids, one always felt, were among his friends, and he would often repeat quaint expressions or wise saws of theirs with pleasure. All these things made his life, in Chaucer's phrase, so 'paisible and swete'. So he might have lived quietly in college and garden. But this was the part of his life which was least known to the wide world in which he moved as scholar, teacher, and man of affairs.

Take the last first. He became Bursar of his College just at the time when Oxford suffered most severely from agricultural depression, and he lived to see it rich and prosperous, a result due not a little to his wise and cautious guidance. He was Pro-Provost, and thus, under the Statutes of that date, head of the College, from 1911 to 1922, ruling with wisdom and geniality, and becoming extremely popular with all Queen's men, young and old.

He became Warden of his old school, Bradfield, at a difficult time, and he guided it to a new success. Similar was the work he did on numerous University Boards and Committees, always prudent, helpful, and sagacious.

But it is as an historian that the British Academy will remember him, and here the association is wholly with Oxford. He was elected from Bradfield to a scholarship at Exeter College in 1865, took two first classes, and became Fellow of Queen's in 1869. He began his modern history teaching in 1879 and continued it for more than forty years, instructing not only Queen's men but others by arrangement, and becoming the most popular and influential of all those engaged in the training of the rapidly increasing number of girl students of different colleges. He examined at other Universities, and for two years he was Reader in Foreign History in his own. His lectures were extremely systematic, detailed, and exact. But his chief educational work was done with individuals, to whom he devoted an infinity of pains and whose personal friend he almost always became. To read Aristotle's *Politics* with him says one of his pupils 'was an illumination of all history: the reach of his mind never seemed cramped or hindered by the feeblest of pupils: one was spurred and shamed into endeavouring to keep up with him not only by his mental power but by his whole genial personality'. And another speaks of his extraordinarily detailed knowledge of Italian historians 'so that we all seemed to be exploring together unfamiliar texts', and adds that he seemed to have lived in medieval Italy, and a visitor to Florence could find her way about from what he had said, and recognize all sorts of delightful details. The amount of care he devoted to personal teaching, criticism, encouragement, and advice, is indeed almost incredible, and his pupils rewarded his unstinted service with a persisting and devoted loyalty. The College to which he belonged was remarkable for the distinction of its senior members, Magrath, Sayce, Grose, A. C. Clark, E. M. Walker, T. W. Allen conspicuous among

them; but no one perhaps was so intimate or so influential in his relation with the undergraduates as was he.

His history teaching led up to his writings, on which his fame as an eminent historian will rest. On the literary side his chief study was devoted to the historical setting of Dante, of which probably no Englishman had so close a knowledge. As a member of the Oxford Dante Society he wrote a number of learned and brilliant papers, notably on Dante's political ideas, on the constitution of Florence in his time, on the sports and pastimes of his age (a particularly vivid and original essay), and, in the very last months of his life, on the Popes of Dante's lifetime. These, and some others of his papers, well deserve collection in a volume. His knowledge of Italian history became wide and exact. It was exemplified in a compact and attractive biography of *Lorenzo de' Medici* (1896). This showed a complete knowledge of all the modern literature of the subject, and, though the author disclaimed original research, it is quite clear that he had studied the original authorities. The style was free and natural, with some such quips as abounded in Armstrong's conversation. 'Nothing is easier than to murder one man, few things more difficult than to murder two', is an example. *Elizabeth Farnese* (1892), which combined Spanish with Italian history, was a work of original research, and was based largely on documents which the writer studied in Italy and Spain. More popular again were the brilliant lectures on *The French Wars of Religion*, which were delivered at the summer meeting of the Oxford University Extension in 1892, and then expanded into a book. These were not only the result of long study of the history of the period but were written in a sparkling and attractive style, with the personal touches in which the writer delighted—'Land for nothing and another class to pay the taxes is the invariable programme of rural revolutions'—and masterly analyses of character. The book was important as showing how little religion really had to do with those religious wars and how deep was the

moral corruption of the times, which the Huguenots, immersed in political intrigue, made no real effort to stem. It showed, as Stubbs and S. R. Gardiner had shown, that it was possible for an exact and learned scholar of history in detail to write in summary briefly and brilliantly. It may be that the nature of that Summer Meeting, at which Addington Symonds and Walter Pater also lectured, inspired Armstrong to a greater freedom of style than was usual with him ; but though he was personally friendly with many Extension Lecturers he often spoke severely of the encouragement which he believed the system gave to hasty generalization and inadequate study.

Armstrong's *magnum opus* was his *Charles V* (first edition 1901, second 1910). The biography was an extraordinarily complete one, in spite of the limits which he had set himself. It is true of it, as Freeman would often say of Gibbon, that everything belonging to the time is there, not always discoverable at first, but revealing itself to the student as he knows what to search for, and teaching him more and more in proportion to his knowledge. Armstrong treated Charles primarily from the point of view of a biographer : the times are seen in relation to the man. But this involved no loss of wide survey : on the contrary, it may be doubted if there has ever been given a survey of the age of Charles V which is illuminative over so large a field. And everywhere Armstrong walked with the firm tread of a master. He had no prejudices, or if he had he disguised them well. He had no gaps in his knowledge, or he covered them very adroitly. His description, for example, of the religious attitude of Charles V is eminently clear and judicious ; and, the same eulogium may well be passed on his treatment of Luther. The little touches of intimate knowledge with which he delighted to enliven his pages again and again add vividness to our understanding of the position and the men. He admirably summed up Luther's position at Worms, and analysed the nature of Charles's repugnance to him ; he sketched the unhappy position of Adrian of

Utrecht as Pope with equal force ; he was clear and emphatic in tracing the final cause of the *Bauernkrieg* to Luther and his followers : he set Charles in his right place as a missionary sovereign ; he showed that in the matter of toleration the Emperor was at least as liberal as the Lutherans ; he illustrated to the full Charles's candour and directness, as well as his irresolution, in dealing alike with popes and heretics. This and much more that we might say may be summed up in the conclusion that the book supplied just that perspective which exclusively theological studies of the Reformation history so greatly need.

After the founding of the *English Historical Review* he contributed many careful criticisms to it, chiefly on Italian, German, and Spanish books. He disliked the work, but was extraordinarily careful, accurate, and patient in it.

Something must be said too of the travels which did so much to give him the topographical knowledge in which so many historians are deficient. He came to know Italy and the Italians intimately, and Spain too, and France, and Germany, though less closely. He loved to walk over little-known country. He began to travel in 1873 and from that time was very frequently abroad. From Italy he went to Greece : later to Spain. Often he was in libraries studying manuscripts : more often on the road, seeing historic sites with his own eyes. Often he made himself known among the humbler folk : it is told how at San Vigilio on the Lago di Garda the people hung out flags to salute him.

Travel brings to memory another aspect of his talent. Of those who thought they had read all he wrote, few probably knew that he could write verse as well as prose ; but thirty years ago or so, he told in genuine poetry the story of Venice, and sent it to the little girl of two of his friends. She was christened 'Venetia' ; and the lines happily mingle the thoughts of the coming of the babe to happy parents and of the city that rose on the stillness of the shore where men's 'life lay round them like a wide lagoon', and gradually as

the fisher-folk made the approach to their land open to the
'friendly craft of outer folk',

A little span of years—there seemed to be
A mirage town afloat 'tween shore and sea,
And none could guess how fishers' humble home
Outshone the splendour of Imperial Rome.

It would not be true perhaps to say that he loved Venice more than any other Italian town, more than Florence which he knew so well : it seemed to those who knew him that he delighted most in the little towns, perched upon hill tops, or far from the ordinary ways of men. That Venice had a special place in his heart was perhaps due to his friendship with Horatio Brown, who lived there so many years, whom he visited, and whom one often met in the summer in his company at Queen's. Brown received, as he did, the Serena medal : their close study of Italian history linked them together, but still more their common delight in simple human persons and the simple things of life, and their friendship with T. W. Allen, one of the most learned of Armstrong's colleagues and one to whom he was greatly attached. With Brown he once went from Venice to Ravenna, partly by carriage, partly by boat. Armstrong admired Addington Symonds, whose devoted friend and biographer was Horatio Brown, but in the unsentimental exactness of his knowledge of things Italian he resembled the latter much more than the former.

Sometimes he travelled with scholarly friends, Horatio Brown, T. W. Allen, G. McN. Rushforth, R. H. Hodgkin, and others : sometimes with his wife, his sister, and in earlier years his mother : quite as often alone. Once he went to Norcia in the Abruzzi, above Spoleto, intending to cross the pass of the Apennines down to the other side : but was stopped there by snow and went round by Macerata, Fermo, Ascoli, and other out-of-the-way places. Always he was on the look-out for historical sites, examined ancient walls, peered into obscure places which had some historical interest long ago.

In 1908 he represented Oxford at the Tercentenary of the University of Oviedo, and was really the life of the somewhat promiscuous gathering ; unfailing in cheeriness and good temper, refusing to be vexed by others' eccentricities, making Spanish orations with infinite pains in their composition, and always a very prince of travelling companions, eager to help every one in public and in private. Perhaps that indeed was his most prominent characteristic—his constant helpfulness ; certainly all his pupils would say it was ; and so too would his friends. His social gifts were very remarkable. He was a most excellent conversationalist : we have rarely met his equal for saving a dull meal, or waking up slow people, or breaking the ice. He liked all kinds of people, and his various experiences (South Africa as a child, and his travels) gave him a choice of topics. The officers quartered in Queen's during the War were amazed at his military knowledge, and the South Africans with his acquaintance with Cape and Natal families. Every one felt the charm of his 'humanity'.

He hated anything approaching assumption or self-advertisement. The references in his books carefully understated his research. I think I told him once of the motion of a clever undergraduate at the Union (who I believe became a Jesuit) 'that in the opinion of this House, sweet are the uses of advertisement', and he regarded it as an assertion of sheer wickedness : one is reminded of a saying of Gladstone's about Disraeli. Parade of learning disgusted him just as much as did hasty generalization. The sincerity of his historical work was in keeping with the sincerity of his personal life.

I will end by quoting a very vivid picture of him as a teacher which has been given to me by a learned scholar who was at one time his pupil and later his colleague in the History teaching at Oxford. It is written in the very style which Armstrong himself might have used and certainly would greatly have enjoyed.

‘Once upon a time an insolent undergraduate, wearing an odd combination of a Bullingdon tie and a studious cast of countenance, ascending the steps of a formidable looking building in the Oxford High Street, asked hesitatingly, “Is this a College called Queen’s?” There ensued an angry affirmative and then, “Mr. Armstrong is taking his private pupils in lecture-room so and so”.

‘The Society of believers into which the *giaour* was thus admitted was gathered together to study that limited period of Italian history which is covered by the invasions of the French under Kings Charles VIII and Louis XII. It involved the study in close detail of the works of the philosophical historians Machiavelli and Guicciardini as well as those of statesmen like Commynes and soldiers like da Porto. Mr. Armstrong’s method was to take each book in turn, threading his way with consummate ease through the bewildering jungle of the politics and constitutions of the different Italian States. If it was a question of geography you were made to see in a flash why, for example, Vicenza was so difficult to defend, “overlooked by a long range of hills something like Shotover”: and so with questions of economics and strategy. If the political or historical theories of the authorities were in question there were illuminating incursions into the theory of the historical cycle, the meaning of “Fortuna” or the influence of astrology on contemporary thought. Then the complicated histories and constitutions of Florence and Venice were sorted out, and clarified, while the characters of the party leaders were painted with a vigour which a Lytton Strachey might envy. Even after many many years the hearer feels that he could give a sketch of the complicated manœuvres which preceded the Battle of Ghiara d’Adda, or define the difference between a *pratica* and a *pratica stretta* in the history of Florence. Not less remarkable was the personal interest Mr. Armstrong took in all those who sat at his feet. The writer well remembers complaining that the Constitution of Florence was so intricate that he despaired of ever coming

to a comprehension of it. "Well, my friend," said he, "if you don't understand it, neither do I: but take comfort, neither do the Examiners".

'It is difficult to imagine a more gracious and tranquillizing answer. For there was in it not only the subtly flattering comparison between the state of knowledge of an ignorant undergraduate and that of one who was truly *Maestro di coloro che sanno*, but also an intimation that that grim body of persons—to every candidate for the honour schools Inquisition, Star Chamber, and Ku Klux Klan rolled into one—was not after all superhuman. It came to pass in the fullness of time that the recipient of this confidence himself became a member of that body. Then he saw and believed.'

Edward Armstrong, Fellow of Queen's College, Oxford, and of the British Academy, died in the house he had built and provided with a beautiful garden which he designed and tended, the Red House, Oxford, on April 11, 1928: full, it may be truly said, of years and honours.

Felix quem veritas per se docet, non per figuras et voces trans-euntes, sed sicuti se habet.

W. H. HUTTON,
Dean of Winchester.