

DAVID BINNING MONRO, 1836-1905

By J. COOK WILSON

IN the late Provost of Oriel College, his country has lost its most eminent Homeric critic and his University one of its wisest counsellors and most gifted scholars.

David Binning Monro, born in Edinburgh, November 16, 1836, came of a Scotch family of position. As eldest son, he inherited the two properties of Auchinbowie in Stirlingshire and Softlaw in Roxburghshire. He had ancestors of high rank in the scientific world; his grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather were all of them Professors of Anatomy in the famous medical faculty of Edinburgh.

As a young student at Glasgow he showed the many-sided talent which distinguished him in later life. He excelled not only in Classical Philology, but also in Mathematics and Logic, and when he left Glasgow for Oxford it is said that he was at first uncertain whether he should devote himself chiefly to Mathematics or to Philology.

At Oxford he won a scholarship at Balliol College; and besides this, he obtained from Glasgow the Snell Exhibition. His career as a student was remarkable. In the Degree Examinations he distinguished himself again in both Classics and Mathematics. In 1858 he won the 'Ireland Scholarship.' In 1859 he obtained the University Prize for a Latin Essay on the Argonaut Myth (an augury of what was to be the work of his life), and after a brilliant examination was elected Fellow of Oriel College.

He at first studied for the Bar, but on the special invitation of his college he came back to Oxford, where for fourteen years, that is, till he became Vice-Provost and, in effect, head of the college, he devoted himself to the work of a tutor and lecturer.

Here his many-sidedness came again to light: for in the list of his lectures are found, besides Homer and Comparative Philology, subjects of Greek Philosophy, Early Greek History, Thucydides, Herodotus, Early Roman History, Roman Constitutional History, and

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Roman Public Law. In Logic he was always interested, and it was a kind of hobby of his to give 'Pass-men' instruction in the elements of it. He printed also a short outline of the Rules of Syllogistic Logic for the use of his hearers.

But all his life long Homer and the study of Comparative Philology remained his chief interests. With regard to the latter he was held by far the greatest authority in Oxford after Max Müller. For him, indeed, these two branches were intimately connected, and he expressly advocated the necessity of a thorough knowledge of the results of linguistic research for the criticism of Homer. An interesting example of this view is a paper of his (*Transactions of the Oxford Philological Society*, 1888-9, p. 6), where it is shown how a number of erroneous emendations had arisen in some cases from imperfect acquaintance with Comparative Philology, and in others from imperfect acquaintance with Homeric idiom.

The first publication which made Monro known outside his own University was apparently his article in the *Quarterly Review* for October, 1868, entitled 'The Homeric Question'. In later years he recast and developed his views in an article published in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1880, art. 'Homer')—an essay which remains to-day unsurpassed in English scholarship in this field, or only surpassed by his own last utterance in the edition of the *Odyssey*. A copy of this was found among his papers with manuscript changes and additions intended for a new edition in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. This has been prepared for publication by his faithful fellow-worker, T. W. Allen.

After this he wrote regularly year by year essays, reviews, and articles on a variety of subjects—Homer and the Epic Cycle, Comparative Philology, Roman Antiquities, Plato, Aristotle, Greek Grammar, Greek Mathematics, and Greek Music, in the *Quarterly*, the *Academy*, the *Journal of Philology*, the *Transactions of the Oxford Philological Society*, the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, the *Classical Review*, and the *Historical Review*, about ninety articles in all¹; for the most part short but to the point, and generally decisive; for Monro was wont only to write when long and scientific testing of evidence had made him fairly sure of his ground.

He collated the Venetian MSS. of the scholia to the *Iliad* for Dindorf's edition (Clarendon Press, 1875 and 1878).

His first book appeared in the year 1878. Monro exercised so strict a selfcriticism that it was sometimes doubted whether he would

¹ For an enumeration of these see a short memoir published by the Clarendon Press.

ever come to a book at all, and it so happened that his first was a school edition of *Iliad I*, apparently a small matter for a man of his reputation. But the modest little volume, which contained an excellent short Homeric Grammar, betrayed the hand of a master; and the competent judge could observe how often in its traditional and unquestioned explanations of the text were disposed of in an unassuming manner. Six years later appeared his school edition of the first half of the *Iliad*, and in 1889 that of the second half. The short introduction on the main points of the Homeric question and the short summaries of the argument of the books are excellent of their kind. The latter taken together give a clear view of what is most essential in the way of evidence for the unity and consistency of the whole poem.

In 1882 appeared at last his principal work, the *Grammar of the Homeric Language*, so long in the conception, and so eagerly awaited by his fellow-workers. This book put him in the first rank among grammarians and Homeric scholars, and confirmed in the world at large the reputation which he had long enjoyed at home.

The second edition of the *Homeric Grammar* appeared in 1891; in 1894 *Modes of Greek Music*. The latter constitutes an important contribution to the history of this celebrated problem; and even if perhaps the solution offered should not win approval, the union of clear exposition and logical arrangement of the materials with accurate knowledge of the ancient sources and mastery of the principles of music must command admiration. In 1896 he published an edition of the Homeric text, *Homeri opera et reliquiae* (the readings for the *Hymns* by T. W. Allen); and in 1902, in collaboration with T. W. Allen, a text of the *Iliad* provided with an apparatus criticus.

But the chief work of his later years was an edition of the last twelve books of the *Odyssey*, with a Commentary and comprehensive appendices on the chief problems of Homeric research, published by the Clarendon Press in 1901. Here are put together the results of years of careful study of the Homeric question. With unwearied industry he had made himself master of all the necessary material, and had submitted everything to a slow, thorough, and searching scrutiny. The remarkable patience with which he reserved his judgement was a proverb among his acquaintance, who, indeed, often felt that his decision might be too long deferred. But Monro had a horror of all that was unripe and premature, and his long deliberation is fully justified by its results, which, as time goes on, will be recognized more and more as a pattern of sound and sober judgement. It must be expressly noticed that Monro possessed just the faculty which,

though necessary before all else to the handling of the Homeric question, is only too often lacking in criticism of the analysing and dissecting type—a fine sense of literary form.

Monro's style is scientific in the best sense of the word; compact and curt, but not sacrificing lucidity to brevity, good pure English 'simplex munditiis'. The mode of statement is singularly clear, and the course of the argument shows an analytical transparency for which perhaps he had to thank his training in Logic and Mathematics.

In the various movements of his time for the reform and advance of the higher education Monro bore an important part.

In all probability he was the chief and perhaps the sole founder of the Oxford Philological Society. He was the first president of it: the first meeting (1870) was held in his rooms in Oriel College, and, with a few exceptions, for thirty years all the meetings were at Oriel. During the whole of this time he was president the first nine years he was also secretary, and managed all the affairs of the Society. It should not be forgotten that it was Monro who organized a union of certain Oxford colleges to form collections of special subjects in their libraries.

He belonged to the group of scholars who founded the *Academy*, and was for many years a contributor. He had a share in the institution of the Hellenic Society. From the beginning he was a member of the Council, and often attended its sittings. From 1886 onwards he was Vice-President of the Society itself. He was also a member of the Standing Committee which founded and controlled the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*.

In the establishment of the Classical Association of England and Wales Monro played a considerable part, as is apparent from the account of its first meeting (see *Classical Review*, February, 1904). From the beginning he was Vice-President, attended the public meetings, and he was often at the sittings of the Council, and took a lively interest in the work of the Society.

He was always a generous supporter of the British School at Rome, and for the last fifteen years of his life was on the Council of the British School at Athens.

If a right estimate is to be formed of the work of Monro's life, it must be borne in mind that he constantly devoted himself in a self-sacrificing manner to the service of his University and of his college. He united practical shrewdness and liberal views with rare impartiality, and that is why he was so indispensable in the business affairs of the University.

For twenty years he was on the Helixlomalad Council, for twelve years on the Board of Curators of the University Museum, and for twenty years on the Delegation of the University Press. For about three years he was pro-Vice-Chancellor, and for three years Vice-Chancellor of the University. In dealings with foreign universities his talent for languages came in very usefully. He spoke German, French, and Italian, and was able on academical occasions to make public speeches in all three languages.

In academical politics Monro belonged distinctly to the party of reform, and must be reckoned as one of its chief leaders. Great value was set upon his opinion, for he was credited with remarkable clearness of vision and soundness of judgement. His manner was, from first to last, unobtrusive, and so it came about that his influence reached further than people suspected. The changes which a Parliamentary Commission in the seventies introduced into the constitution of the University were not all to his mind, but he strongly approved of some of them, and he contributed a good deal towards putting the new regulations into an advantageous and practical shape.

Monro was by nature very quiet and retiring, and on that account, outside the narrow circle of his intimate acquaintance, he passed for a somewhat cold disposition. In reality he was kind-heartedness itself. Those who sought his help never sought it in vain. The undergraduates of his college were fond of him, the college servants adored him, and he was touchingly devoted to children.

The honorary degree of Doctor of Laws was conferred upon him by the University of Glasgow, that of Doctor of Letters by Trinity College, Dublin, and that of Doctor of Civil Law by his own University. From France he received the honorary title of 'Officier de l'Instruction Publique.' He was one of the original Fellows of the British Academy, whose names are the only ones which appear in the foundation charter.

This brief sketch may be closed with an estimate of Monro's Homeric work communicated by Mr. T. W. Allen, who has been already mentioned as his faithful friend and collaborator.

'What distinguished Monro's Homeric work from that of other Englishmen of his generation was, in the first place, his knowledge of Comparative Grammar or Philology. When he began to write on Homer he was almost alone in this possession, and at his death there are few members of his own University who have a first-hand knowledge of Comparative Philology.

'This equipment enabled him, on the one hand, to take account of the results of the comparative method in establishing the Homeric text beyond the period of literary tradition, and thereby preserved him from the one-sided attitude of

so eminent a Homerist as Arthur Ludwich : and on the other, it gave him the means to gauge and to resist the eccentricities of the purely linguistic school. Monro, from the first, denied the hypothesis of August Fick, which still in a modified form holds the field on the Continent, namely, that Homer was originally written in the Aeolic dialect ; and in his latest work, the Appendix to the *Odyssey*, Books XIII-XXIV, he may be said to have given the deathblow to it. He there laid down his own theory of the Homeric language (which he also embodied in a paper read at the Archaeological Congress at Rome in 1903), namely, that it was one of the varieties of the common tongue of pre-Dorian Greece, which accident and the merits of Homer elevated to the position of a literary language. This theory, that of the *illustre vulgare*, appears likely to prevail.

His position in Homeric criticism was defined by tradition on the one hand, and linguistic results on the other. He had difficulty in admitting into the text a form recovered to the Greek language by linguistic method unless there was documentary evidence to show that it had once stood in the text, or its disappearance could be easily and clearly accounted for. Thus he restored ἦος τῆος τεθνηὸς, &c., on the ground that the MS. forms were the result of mechanical mistranscription, but retained metrical irregularities like Αἰόλου, ἀνεψιού, &c., because the forms in -oo are without inscriptional testimony, and cannot be assigned to a definite period. In these matters his method was very much that of Aristarchus, who, so far as we can gather, did not admit a correction into the Vulgate of his day, unless diplomatic authority could be found for it. Monro, indeed, in many respects, resembled that most judicious of ancient critics. Besides this he was a great exegete, and had a sure knowledge both of Greek and of Homeric usage. His annotations, of which he was sparing, are mostly in this province.

He was in one sense not original. Probably he had done little actual collection of material—though it is absurd to call his work, as a recent German critic has done, a “mosaic”. From this position—that of estimating and utilizing the statistics of others—he derived two benefits: the absence of intellectual fatigue, which prevents the researcher from weighing and utilizing his own collections, and freedom from prejudice and partiality. His judgement indeed was unapproached. The motives for liking or dislike were far from him, and from his verdict there is seldom an appeal. Few can have had dealings with him, personal or literary, without feeling that πρότερος γέγονει καὶ πλείονα “δη.”