

## JOHN GEORGE ROBERTSON

1867-1933.

JOHN GEORGE ROBERTSON was born in Glasgow on 18 January 1867, the eldest of five children. His father, John Robertson, Lecturer in the Glasgow Church of Scotland Training College and subsequently head master of more than one public school, was a man of wide interests. His *English Grammar* enjoyed a sale of over 200,000 copies and was reprinted in the United States. Most of his spare time was devoted to natural science, particularly chemistry, geology, and botany, and he looked back on the publication of *The Origin of Species* as one of the greatest experiences of his life.

From the youthful journals and later autobiographical jottings we realize the immense influence of the elder Robertson on his precocious son. His mother, Janet Scott Duncan, on the other hand, an intelligent and cultivated woman, lacked the gift of intimacy and played little part in his life. The boy started botanical and geological collections, and the summer holidays on the west coast were times of special delight. He dated his deep interest in science from his eleventh year, and note-books were filled with lists of birds and flowers. While still at school he delivered amateur lectures and edited a magazine. He enjoyed listening to Tyndall and other celebrities who visited his native city. We find him busy with a microscope and the study of the moon, and he began to dabble in electricity, magnetism, and chemistry. In literature his favourite author was Scott, and at the age of fifteen his lifelong interest in music began. But when he left school it was science that counted and little else.

Robertson entered Glasgow University in 1882 in his sixteenth year. He was ill prepared for the classical studies which were to claim so much of his time, but he quickly found his feet. Jebb's lectures opened his eyes not only to

the glories of Greek, above all of Plato, but to the claim of the humanities. The interest in science remained, but literature began to exert its irresistible spell. At the age of sixteen, after reading *Faust* in a translation, he resolved to learn German. Pictures from *Hermann und Dorothea* in his parents' house had long made the name of Goethe familiar, and he now transferred a bronze bust of the poet from the dining-room mantelpiece to a bracket in his own room. Though reading omnivorously in English and French literature, and enjoying Petrarch's sonnets in the original, his thoughts turned increasingly to Germany. He began a translation of *Nathan der Weise*, and his eighteenth birthday found him immersed in Heine. Every moment he could steal from his official studies was devoted to his new-found delights.

Robertson's journals, with their long lists of books, indicate that his real life was not lived in the class-rooms. At the opening of 1886 he recorded the disappointing impressions of his University career. 'My greatest debt is to the magnificent library. My second is to Professor Jebb, the only member of the staff to whom I owe a debt. He alone inspired me with enthusiasm for his subject. I have very little respect and feel very little debt to the University.' He went on to recall his conversion from science to literature, above all to the literature of Germany. 'In the summer of 1883 I first read *Sartor Resartus*, and through Carlyle I was introduced to Goethe and to German thought. To *Sartor* and *Faust* I owe the deepest debt of gratitude, for they above all have moulded my life to what it is to-day and I hope will ever rule it.' But though he hailed Carlyle and Goethe as his masters, he still believed that he would have to earn his living as a teacher of science. 'It is not because I have any special aptitude or care for it, but one must gain one's bread and butter in some way and this way is perhaps the least distasteful.' It was a far cry from the absorbing hobbies of his school days.

When Robertson graduated in the summer of 1886,

science seemed destined to play a prominent part in his outer if not in his inner life. Still under twenty, he decided to add to his degree of M.A. that of B.Sc., which involved another three years at Glasgow. At the beginning of this second phase of his University career he mapped out his plans. The autumn of 1888 he hoped to spend in Berlin, specializing in chemistry. 'And so by my twenty-second year I hope to be in a position to apply for some post as teacher of physical science.' The last years at Glasgow, however, were not a happy time. His journals complain of the dull grind, of a feeling of loneliness, of fatigue, of disinclination for continuous work. He was still convinced that only by science could he earn his living; but though he studied with his usual perseverance, it was toil without joy. He found consolation in *Faust*, which he attempted to learn by heart; in Dante, who filled him with enthusiasm; in music and the theatre. He attended a course of lectures in German on the history of German literature. He joined the English Goethe Society, recently instituted under the Presidency of Max Müller, and plunged into the second part of *Faust*.

When Robertson graduated as Bachelor of Science in the spring of 1889 he turned his back for ever on the studies which had cost him such weary hours. The appeal of literature had become irresistible, and in responding to the call he was prepared for any sacrifice. The first use of his leisure was to learn Norwegian, for Ibsen had swept into his ken, and by the end of the summer he had translated *The Doll's House* and *The Lady from the Sea*. He was also busy with Spanish, though he was never to care so much for the Southern as for the Northern tongues. In the autumn the dream of years was fulfilled when he was installed as a student at Leipzig. We hear no more of depression and ill health, for every day brought fresh rewards. He plunged into Gothic and Middle High German, attending many lectures and profiting by that valuable institution, then almost unknown outside Germany,

the Seminar. Among his teachers of German philology he owed most to Zarncke and Sievers, while Anglo-Saxon, Old French, Old Norse, and elementary Sanskrit were added to his list of tongues. The opera and theatre satisfied his consuming passion for Wagner and the drama at modest cost. Holidays were used for visits to the Harz and Bohemia. He looked back on his years in Leipzig as the happiest of his life; for here too he met his future wife, later known to the literary world as Henry Handel Richardson, whose success was a source of affectionate pride. A vivid picture of the cosmopolitan student life at Leipzig in the nineties is to be found in her first novel *Maurice Guest*, published in 1908.

The most serious business of the young student was to choose a theme for his Doctor's thesis. Herford's *Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Sixteenth Century* had directed attention to a field that had been little worked, and his first plan was a study of English influence on German drama in that period. The theme proved far too ambitious, and the final choice fell on Jacob Ayrer, the principal dramatist of the closing years of the century. The Dissertation, *Zur Kritik Jakob Ayrers mit besonderer Rücksicht auf sein Verhältnis zu Hans Sachs und den englischen Komödianten*, a work of seventy pages, consisted, as the title reveals, of two parts. The first discussed his close relationship to the greatest German dramatist of the century, extending beyond the choice of subjects, treatment, and metres to cases of unblushing plagiarism. The second analysed the influence of the English actors who visited the cities of middle Germany at the close of the century, from whom he borrowed the clown or comic figure who formed the most popular feature of their art. By thus sharply differentiating between the earlier and later periods of authorship he corrected the tendency to exaggerate Ayrer's total debt to English influence. The dissertation reveals not only complete acquaintance with an obscure corner of German literature but a marked capacity for independent judgement on a controversial theme.

Robertson left Leipzig with his degree of Ph.D. in the summer of 1892, after ten years of University life, a ripe scholar of twenty-five. But on returning home he found the problem of employment at least as difficult as he had always feared. He competed without success for lectureships in German at St. Andrews, Edinburgh, Manchester, and Glasgow. Examining and journalism brought in a few pounds, but offers of articles were usually declined. His failure to obtain a settled position aroused some friction, for his desertion of science for literature could only be justified in his father's eyes by the rough test of success. He speaks of the crushing, chilly effect of home, and indeed the years 1893 and 1894 were the saddest of his life. He was modestly conscious of his worth, which was recognized by older fellow students such as Fiedler and Oswald; but German was only beginning to find a footing in the Universities, and even ill-paid posts were few. The enforced leisure was only rendered tolerable by unceasing work. His most congenial task was an edition published in 1895 (the first for English students) of *Der arme Heinrich*, the exquisite medieval story by Hartmann von Aue of a powerful knight, stricken by leprosy and miraculously healed by the consent of a little girl to sacrifice her own life for his salvation. In the same year appeared his edition of *Immensee*, the popular masterpiece of Theodor Storm, the painter of North German peasant life.

After meeting with rebuffs from four Universities and despairing of better fortune elsewhere in the British isles, Robertson returned to Germany at the opening of 1895 intending to support himself by his pen. He settled at Munich, where both theatre and opera were better than at Leipzig. He extolled their achievements, and the lofty ideas and spirit in which they were conducted, in an article 'Twenty-five Years of a German Court Theatre' published in the *National Review*. The *Fortnightly Review* accepted a study of Grillparzer, the *Saturday Review* an appreciation of Herder, and he contributed to the short-lived *Cosmopolis*,

a high-brow journal with articles in English, French, and German. He also worked at his edition of a selection from the correspondence of Schiller and Goethe, published in 1898, containing eighty-six out of the thousand odd letters, enriched by an elaborate Introduction.

The year 1896 witnessed the turning of the long lane in Robertson's appointment as English lecturer at Strassburg University. The salary was only £120 a year, but happiness returned in full flood. 'His main work,' writes his wife, 'was of course the *History of German Literature*. The magnificent Staatsbibliothek was only five minutes from where we lived, and many hundreds of books were carried to and fro. Life was cheap and pleasant. Every fortnight or so we spent a day in the Black Forest or the Vosges, walking for hours. He was always a magnificent walker, and up to a month before he died he did his four miles an hour. We walked all over the Dolomites together and the Bavarian Highlands and Switzerland.'

The acceptance of an increasing number of articles and reviews in *Literature*, the *Quarterly*, and elsewhere brought a welcome addition to the modest salary; and his services to the University were recognized by the title of Professor Extraordinarius. But the happiest event of the early Strassburg years was the arrangement with Blackwood in 1897 to publish a *History of German Literature*. Such a work was urgently needed, for there was nothing corresponding to Saintsbury's familiar volume on France. The excellent series entitled *Literatures of the World*, edited by Edmund Gosse, was beginning to appear, but Germany was one of the latest to be published. It was an immense encouragement, after years of apprenticeship, to have a task into which he could pour his learning and his taste, and he rose gallantly to the occasion. He knew every step of the road, for the Leipzig years had brought him a grasp of the medieval and the pre-classical periods rarely possessed by foreign scholars. Its publication in 1902 was the decisive event in his life. Warmly welcomed by the reviewers, its

steady sale began at once and has never ceased. Well arranged, clearly written, sober in judgement, and fortified by ample bibliographies, it won its place as the indispensable companion of teachers and students. At the age of thirty-five the author had arrived. His youthful decision to follow his bent was justified in his father's eyes, for the publication of the book brought him, in the following year, an invitation to the chair of German Language and Literature in the University of London newly founded by the London County Council. The triumph was enhanced by the fact that he had not applied for the post. He had already declined the Chair of German in the University of Michigan; and had he remained in Germany he would have been offered a Professorship of Comparative Literature.

Robertson's activities in London, which lasted till his death thirty years later, form an important chapter in the academic history of the new century. When he returned from Strassburg, German was generally treated like a poor relation: when he died, it had taken its rightful place as an essential part in the curriculum of every British University. His exact philological knowledge, his unflagging industry, and his inexhaustible kindness to his pupils helped to make London the chief centre of German studies in the British Empire. While Pribsch, his friend and colleague, specialized in the Middle Ages, Robertson devoted himself mainly to the Augustan writers who had won his allegiance as a boy. It was a fruitful partnership, to which generations of students, many of whom have themselves become teachers, look back with abiding gratitude. When a chair of German was founded at Cambridge in 1910 by Baron Schröder he was invited by the Master of Peterhouse, Sir Adolphus Ward, to be a candidate; but he declined to stand in opposition to his old friend Karl Breul. There was scarcely a chair in German in the British Empire in the filling of which his advice was not obtained.

During his first year in London Robertson delivered a series of ten public lectures on Schiller, in which he

attempted to define the Anglo-Saxon standpoint towards the poet. The lectures were worked up into a small volume, *Schiller after a Century*, published in 1905, the centenary of his death. The tone is cool and almost chilly, for throughout life Robertson was less interested in Schiller than in Goethe and Lessing. The idealized hero of the centenary celebrations of 1859, he asserts, never existed. Under the guidance of scholars like Hermann Grimm, Wilhelm Scherer, and Erich Schmidt a younger generation had discovered that Goethe, not Schiller, was the embodiment of Germany's spiritual aspirations. The younger of the great twin brethren, he declares, was a cosmopolitan humanitarian, a child of his far-away age, not the poet of political or national freedom in the nineteenth-century sense. 'As a poet he had exceptional gifts, but his work was not in any special sense national; still less was it for all time.' He was a *Weltbürger* of the eighteenth century, and it is not a mere accident that of all German writers he made the strongest appeal in foreign lands. As a historian, a thinker, and a moralist, no less than as a poet, he belongs completely to his time. 'He is not to be classed with the pioneers who discovered new worlds, with Rousseau, Diderot, and Herder. He fitted new bricks into the structure of eighteenth-century thought, but he constructed no new turrets, planned no new wings. Schiller's work belongs in its ideas as well as in its form to the past. His dramas have ceased to awaken more than an historical interest for the cultured classes.' In a word he lacked originality, and he has little claim to rank with the immortals. This harsh verdict was driven home with remarkable power; but most readers will probably agree that *Schiller* is the least convincing and the least satisfactory of his books.

Robertson's interest in the literatures of every country in Western Europe took shape in 1905 in the foundation of the *Modern Language Review*, which was to be 'devoted to the study of medieval and modern literature and philology'. For the first four years he was sole editor, though aided



by an advisory panel. Later he was assisted by two colleagues, of whom the first were Macaulay and Oelsner. He enlisted the collaboration of many eminent scholars, among them Skeat, Bradley, Paget Toynbee, Dowden, Herford, Ker, Moore Smith, Priebisch, Chambers, Boas, Greg. He remained the commander-in-chief till his death, and regarded his quarterly offspring with special affection. In addition to his occasional articles and numberless reviews he compiled the list of new publications which formed one of its most useful features. In 1922 it was associated with the Modern Humanities Association, under whose auspices it henceforth appeared. His editorial colleagues at the time of his death, Edmund Gardner and Charles Sisson, testify to his sound judgement in the allocation of space to the various fields of study, his unremitting labours, and his unstinting generosity.

*Schiller* was followed by a number of smaller publications. Robertson contributed a chapter on the Augustan age of German Literature to the tenth volume of the *Cambridge Modern History*, and a study of Carlyle to the thirteenth volume of the *Cambridge History of English Literature*. His unrivalled knowledge of the by-ways as well as the highways of continental literature was illustrated by his lecture to the British Academy on *Milton's Fame on the Continent* (1908); by a chapter in the fifth volume of the *Cambridge History of English Literature* on Shakespeare on the Continent; by articles on German Literature in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; and by an edition of *Nathan der Weise* (1912), that 'magnificent monument to German humanitarianism and enlightenment', with an elaborate Introduction on the sources of the plot and on Lessing's debt to Voltaire and Diderot.

In 1912 Robertson published the first of three books on his favourite poet, *Goethe and the Twentieth Century*, written for the *Cambridge Manuals of Science and Literature*. The little volume of 150 pages took full account of the progress of Goethe studies since the appearance of his *History of German*

*Literature.* Unlike Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare, as he pointed out, Goethe was too near us for an agreed verdict to be possible. 'We must revise our opinion of him from time to time'. His purpose was to review the subject in a frankly English way, to test traditional estimates, and above all to emphasize the aspects of his work and teaching which still possessed significance in the new century. The most interesting pages are found in the concluding chapters on the philosopher, the scientist, the critic, and the man. Goethe was no philosopher in the technical sense, and he was never tempted to pierce behind the veil. But he was an 'intensely religious nature', convinced by Spinoza in early life of the oneness of God and the universe, accepting the experiences of history and individual life as an optimistic fatalist. 'His belief in the right governance of the universe was unassailable'. In ethics he stood firmly for the duties of man. The portrait is full of colour, and the poet's failings are sketched with a gentle hand. We are bidden to admire his magnificent individualism and his healthy maxims for the guidance of life. He is the builder, not the destroyer, of happiness and peace. 'Goethe has still the power, in Carlyle's phrase, to free us from unbelief, to lead us back to a faith in ourselves, to help us to grapple with doubt and despair.'

*Goethe and the Twentieth Century* was followed in 1913 by *The Literature of Germany*, the most completely satisfying of his smaller books. Like other contributions to the *Home University Library* it was designed for the general reader, and Robertson supplied the demand in the best brief survey of his subject in any language. In no sense a précis of the larger volume of 1902, which necessarily aimed at completeness and was crowded with detail, the later work shows no sign of congestion. Only the more important men and movements are selected, and the reader grasps the main lines of evolution without effort. It is also more personal, for judgements and generalizations abound. The landmarks of German literature are related to the political and

social as well as to the intellectual history of the time, and contacts with other literatures are kept steadily in view. Robertson's judgements are remarkably steady, for he never cultivated the pose of unconventionality and paradox. On rare occasions he throws aside his reserve, as in his glowing tribute to Hebbel and—a more disputable enthusiasm—to Gottfried Keller.

While German literature remained Robertson's primary concern, he was always on the look-out for international contacts. Soon after his appointment to London he attempted to discover why the eighteenth-century Swiss critic Bodmer, one of the earliest continental writers to mention Shakespeare, should have called him *Saspar*. The explanations hitherto advanced seemed unconvincing, and he surmised that an Italian was more likely to be the culprit than a German. Bodmer's Italian source was quickly located; but the solution of this trifling problem suggested a search of wider significance. Bodmer and his friend Breitinger, it had hitherto been believed, had derived their ideas on literary aesthetics mainly from Addison and Du Bos. But might they not also have owed something to Italy? And might not the English and French critics themselves have incurred obligations in the same quarter? In other words, might not the movement which led to the substitution of imagination for reason as the chief arbiter in poetic creation be an Italian rather than a British achievement? As his researches extended the daring hypothesis grew into a certainty, and a contribution of outstanding importance in the history of comparative literature was achieved. His first task was to copy and collate Bodmer's letters in Swiss, German, and Italian libraries, hoping to co-operate with Swiss scholars in a critical edition of his early correspondence and of certain of his and Breitinger's aesthetic writings; but the war intervened and the scheme was indefinitely postponed. Meanwhile the larger aspect of the question, the influence of Italy on the critical theory of Europe, was zealously pursued, and the fruits of laborious

research were published in 1923 as *Studies in the Genesis of Romantic Theory in the Eighteenth Century*. The book was practically completed before the war, but the long delay enabled him to utilize the latest Italian research.

The object and the result of the most original and the most important of Robertson's books was to show that Italians were the pioneers in critical theory at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and that the conception of the creative imagination which led to the delivery of Europe from the toils of pseudo-classicism was born in Italy to mature in England and Germany. This masterly study in contacts introduces us to a group of writers, Gravina, Muratori, Conti, Martelli, Maffei, Calepio, and Vico, whose work was entirely unfamiliar to English readers; for Muratori and Vico, the only two figures of world-wide renown, were famous for other reasons than for their contribution to literary theory. The later chapters, on Italian influence in France, Spain, England, and Germany, reveal a range of knowledge of the literary by-ways of the eighteenth century in western Europe which no other scholar approached. The demonstration that the stimulus which resulted in the victory of the imagination came from Italy was unchallenged, and the new perspective has become part of the accepted view of the origins of Romanticism.

To a lover and student of Germany such as Robertson the war was a poignant personal grief, but he was never carried away by the pathological hatreds engendered by the clash of arms. His main literary task was the study of Lessing, to which reference will be made later. No large work from his pen appeared during the stormy years; but his edition of *Tasso*, published in 1918, in the *Modern Language Texts* (the modern German section of which was edited by Robertson), embodied a large amount of work. The Introduction of sixty pages deals fully with the sources and the characteristics of a play for which his admiration was unbounded. Next to *Faust* he considered *Tasso* and *Iphigenie* as the greatest and most perfect of Goethe's works;

and of the two he gave the first prize to *Tasso*. Like his edition of *Nathan der Weise* it is a model of advanced editorial work.

When the struggle was over it seemed to the leading Germanist in England a plain duty to rebuild the bridges across the gulf. The Goethe Society had suspended operations during the struggle, and for the first year or two of peace it was considered undesirable to resume. When, however, the extreme bitterness had begun to abate he took counsel with friends, and the Society was revived in 1923. The veteran President, Sir Adolphus Ward, the successor of Max Müller and Edward Dowden, was now eighty-five and passed away in the following year. To make a fresh start it was essential to secure an influential President; and the acceptance of the office by Lord Haldane, the most eminent of Germanophiles and himself a Goethe specialist, was a guarantee of success. Robertson became Chairman of the Council and remained the moving spirit of the society till the end. On Lord Haldane's death in 1928 Herford became President. Two years later, on his death, Robertson succeeded to the post, and wrote the usual detailed record of his predecessor for the British Academy. A new series of publications was inaugurated when the Society was revived, the second volume of which, published in 1925, was Robertson's exhaustive monograph *Goethe and Byron*, which analysed their relations in the light of all the available evidence in greater detail than ever before. Few readers of this admirable study will disagree with the verdict that it was just as well that the two celebrities, who admired each other so warmly at a distance, never met. Among his addresses to the Society were studies of *Iphigenie* and *Tasso*.

Two published addresses of the last decade of Robertson's life take high rank among his achievements. The Taylorian Lecture of 1924, *The Gods of Greece in German Poetry*, recalls in eloquent language what the beauty of Greece has meant for the northern mind. Beginning with

the Augustan age, he passes on to Hölderlin and Heine; and when the gods fade out of German poetry he greets their unexpected resurrection in Switzerland. When the Nobel prize for literature was awarded to Carl Spitteler in 1920, he called the attention of his countrymen to the almost unknown poet in a highly appreciative article in the *Contemporary Review* of January 1921. In the Taylorian Lecture there is no abatement of enthusiasm for *Der olympische Frühling*, 'the greatest poem I veritably believe, in this, the last epoch of German literature. Here once again, after a long span of time, we have in European literature an epic in the noble style, and moreover, an epic of the gods of Greece. The old Olympians come back into our world in radiant, buoyant life.' Spitteler, he added, had scouted tradition and paid the penalty of an incredible neglect. Mr. James Muirhead's courageous endeavours to break down the barrier of ignorant indifference were warmly welcomed by Robertson, who invited him to lecture to the Goethe Society.

As President of the Modern Humanities Research Association for 1924-5 Robertson chose for his theme *The Reconciliation of Classic and Romantic*. After an elaborate analysis of the terms, in which many facile generalizations are assailed and the latest German monographs are acutely discussed, he arrives at the conclusion that the great poets of the world are all both Classic and Romantic. The anti-thesis might remain, but the acute antagonism had faded away.

We have to go back behind the sharp distinction which the nineteenth century imposed on the spiritual life of its early years, to understand that, at bottom, the two opposing forces spring from a common matrix, from that wonderful conception of Humanity which is the most precious of all the heritages that have come down from the eighteenth century. . . . After all, literature, art, is a living, organic thing, a thing of infinite subtleties; its phenomena cannot be confined within watertight compartments; rather are they to be compared with dissolving views. There are no hard and fast boundary lines in literary history. Nor is the individual

soul to be dogmatically labelled Classic or Romantic, or anything else; indeed most sensitive souls go through a series of moultings, in which they are Romantic and Classic by turns.

Goethe, he reminds us significantly, wrote *Werther* in youth, *Iphigenie* in the middle years, and *Der westöstliche Divan* in old age. Thus, he always returns to his favourite writer. 'Goethe is the symbol of the harmonious synthesis we must endeavour to achieve.'

A sketch of Robertson's life, however brief, must find space for some reference to his Scandinavian studies. He had been guided northwards in his closing year at Glasgow University by the rising star of Ibsen, and he had followed the remarkable development of Scandinavian literature with steady interest. But it was not till after the war that he allotted to it a considerable portion of his time. He was deeply impressed by the power and originality of Strindberg, and I remember him telling me that he had just finished reading the forty-four volumes of his collected works in the original. When in 1926 Mr. Bernard Shaw generously devoted the substantial sum accompanying the Nobel prize to the creation of an Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation, for spreading the knowledge of Swedish culture chiefly through the translation of masterpieces of literature, Robertson was invited to act as the adviser.

From the very beginning [writes Baron Palmstierna, the Swedish Minister at the Court of St. James's] he threw himself with unsparing energy and interest into the work. He went through our translations, wrote introductory essays, and generally acted as the literary adviser of the Foundation. Thanks largely to him our translations, which so far include three volumes of Strindberg's dramas, a work by the great nineteenth-century writer and historian Geijer, and a collection of short stories by Per Hallström, are of much higher standard than those existing earlier.

He introduced Swedish and Norwegian into the curriculum and succeeded Ker as Director of Scandinavian studies at University College. He delivered a course of public lectures on the occasion of the Ibsen centenary, and it is hoped that these may be published as revised

shortly before his death. He left an unfinished history of Swedish literature which will be completed by another English hand. His services were rewarded by the Orders of the Northern Star of Sweden and of St. Olaf of Norway.

In 1927 Robertson contributed a volume on Goethe to a biographical series entitled *The Republic of Letters*. The book was double the length of the volume published in 1913, and was designedly less popular in treatment. The author once again asks what Goethe means to the twentieth century. In Germany, he replies, the abundant literature published since 1914 showed that the spiritual leader of his people in their prosperity was a no less trusted guide in their adversity. In his own judgement, however, as the reader quickly discovers, there is a subtle change. He has become more critical, more aware of the failures and disappointments in Goethe's enormous legacy. The dividing line between the matchless creative period of youth and the hardening of the arteries in middle age is more sharply drawn. *Werther* is hailed as a great human document, the greatest completed work before the journey to Italy, and its hero ranks among the immortal figures of imaginative literature. But while his admiration for *Werther* had increased, he laments that, as the years move on, the number of creations that are acknowledged to be irreproachably great seems to diminish. That many of his writings possess an added interest as 'fragments of a great confession' appears to him irrelevant. Aesthetic values, he remarks, are independent of subjective interest, and a work of art must stand or fall by its intrinsic merit. Tried by this test he sadly admits a disparity between Goethe's genius and his achievement. In the second half of his life, he declares, the divine afflatus in great measure evaporated, and the greatest spirit in Europe petrified into a German Geheimrat. He ceased to create naïvely and imaginatively; the artist in him mortified; he became a mere shadow of the inspired, instinctive genius of early days. That in old age he emerged as the wisest of men is no adequate com-



pensation for unwritten masterpieces. Robertson was well aware that this reading of a great life would not command universal assent, and with his quiet smile he used to describe it as his heresy. In the following year, 1928, he contributed a lengthy Introduction to Mr. G. M. Cookson's translation of the First Part of *Faust* in the *Broadway Translation Series*.

In 1931 Robertson issued a new edition of the largest and best known of his books. The *History of German Literature* had enjoyed such steady favour since its publication in 1902 that from the publisher's point of view the opportunity of bringing it up to date never seemed to arise. The *Outlines of the History of German Literature*, published in 1911, merely reduced the original by half through omission of the minor figures. When at length the author approached a task that was long overdue he did more than revise the text in the light of later research. The new century, he explained, had made sweeping changes in estimating traditional values, and his own maturer judgement led him to reconsider opinions expressed a generation before. He transferred from his *Outlines* in a revised form a chronological table of comparative literature, and the bibliography—one of his greatest boons to the advanced student—was enlarged to fill over sixty pages. Above all, two new chapters were added on the twentieth century, which are among the most interesting of his writings, since they deal with writers and tendencies about whom his opinions were hitherto unknown—Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke among poets, the later Hauptmann and Hofmannsthal, Kaiser, Toller, and Unruh, the Expressionist trio, among dramatists, Thomas Mann, Wassermann, and Kolbenheyer among novelists. No book of the new century receives such unstinted praise as *Buddenbrooks*, the German equivalent of the *Forsyte Saga*, the earliest and best creation of Thomas Mann, which is hailed as a work of the first rank. The period was one of continual changes in thought and literature no less than

in politics, and only provisional judgements were possible. But the reader carries away the impression that his experienced guide has failed to discover a star of the first magnitude.

Robertson's final pronouncement on Goethe appeared in 1932, the year of the centenary. He had intended to pay his homage in the form of a collection of studies written during the past thirty years; but he finally decided to incorporate some of their results in an enlarged edition of the work published in 1927. The volume was dedicated to the English Goethe Society in memory of an association of nearly forty years, and was distributed to the members in place of the usual volume of Translations, an arrangement facilitated by the author's generous sacrifice of royalties. While the earlier work was mainly biographical, the larger and far more important volume offered the fullest treatment of the writings that he had ever attempted. The chapter on *Tasso* was abridged from the Introduction to his edition of the play, and the chapter on science is written with a clarity reflecting the Glasgow studies of his youth. *The Life and Work of Goethe*, enriched by illustrations and an elaborate bibliography, took its place as the most authoritative of English biographies. Less scintillating than the imperishable work of Lewes, and less detailed than the weighty volumes of Hume Brown, his swan-song is the most adequate and up-to-date introduction to the most fully documented figure in the history of literature.

Robertson was invited to Weimar as the official representative of Great Britain during the centenary celebrations at the end of March 1932. He was the first of the foreign delegates to address the meeting in a speech in German printed in the *Jahrbuch der Goethe Gesellschaft*, in which he summarized our relations to the poet. The same theme was handled in much greater detail in a paper 'Goethe und England', published in the *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift*. His services to German scholarship were recognized by the bestowal by President von Hindenburg

of the medal *Für Kunst und Wissenschaft*, a distinction which very few foreigners have received. At home he delivered a public course of ten lectures on the poet in the spring, and at the close of the year he delivered a centenary address to the Royal Society of Literature published in volume xii of its *Transactions*. It was the last of his many utterances on the writer who filled the largest place in his life, and we seem to catch something of the glow of the Weimar festivities. He is extolled as the wisest of the moderns, the most far-seeing of men, the great optimist who had attained to inner harmony and peace through victorious struggle.

The preface to the last and largest work on Goethe is dated January 1932, and during the closing eighteen months of his life Robertson's main occupation was Lessing. He had busied himself with the dramatist and the critic for forty years, devoting particular attention to the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, the great text-book of the eighteenth-century theatre. In a series of articles published in the *Modern Language Review* before, during, and after the war he had exhaustively discussed some of the main problems presented by Lessing's critical writings, above all his debt to Aristotle, which Robertson believed to have been less than was generally believed. Lessing's aim was not the interpretation of the *Poetics* but the confutation of the methods of French classicism as embodied above all in the dramas of Voltaire. The attitude of the German iconoclast to the French classics was described in greater detail in an article entitled *Lessing's Criticism of the French Drama* which formed part of the *Mélanges Baldensperger* published in Paris in 1930. A bicentennial address on Lessing delivered to the Royal Society of Literature on 25 February 1929, and published in volume ix of its *Transactions*, summarizes his views on the dramatist, the critic, and the thinker. Unlike many writers who echo Macaulay's verdict that he was the first critic of Europe, Robertson places his four great dramas at the head of his achievement. But the *Laokoon* and the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* also receive high marks for their

acute aesthetic insight, their victorious onslaught on pseudo-classicism, and their championship of the larger freedom of Shakespeare and the Greeks. And finally the fight of the great rationalist for tolerance and freedom against the hard-shelled champions of Lutheran orthodoxy receives the homage it deserves. All these suggestive studies of 'one of the intellectual giants of his century' increase our regret that the long planned and monumental work on the sources and theories of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* was left unfinished. Happily almost the whole was written, and it is being prepared for the press by his pupil and successor Professor Edna Purdie. The volume constitutes a priceless addition to our knowledge of the German theatre and of Lessing's sources, and it places his dramatic theory in historical perspective. It may well come to be regarded as the most important of his books, and it reveals even more fully than the *Genesis of Romantic Theory* his incomparable knowledge of European literature in the eighteenth century.

In the early summer of 1933 Robertson underwent an operation from which he appeared to be making a satisfactory recovery, and he revised the proofs of the July number of the *Modern Language Review*. A month later a second operation was necessary, from which he only recovered momentary consciousness. He died on 28 May. He was survived by his wife, but the marriage was childless.

Robertson's qualities as a scholar—his vast range, his thoroughness, his delicacy of touch—have been indicated in the record of his life. In thinking of the man himself we recall his gentleness of voice and manner, his extreme refinement, his generous helpfulness to pupils and fellow writers, his extraordinary modesty. He was genuinely surprised when informed of his election to the British Academy, and throughout life he was far more interested in his studies than in himself. Though rarely ill he was a bad sleeper and often nervously upset. 'He suffered at times from a real Celtic melancholy', writes his wife, 'and was always rather the solitary scholar than a good mixer. His

happiest hours were spent among his books.' He possessed, nevertheless, remarkable powers of organization, and as Chairman of the Board of Germanic Studies he won golden opinions by the management of his team. He cared little for Scotland and was sometimes heard to quote with a whimsical smile Dr. Johnson's ungallant reply to the question which part of the country he liked the best. He made three long voyages, to Australia, the West Indies, and (in the last summer of his life) to South Africa. Wagner was an unfailing delight; and the course of lectures on the poet-composer delivered at Bedford College in the last year of his life, embodying a good deal of research, will, it is hoped, appear in due course. But perhaps the greatest refreshment in his later years was found in his cottage at Lyme Regis, where he could work the whole day without interruption. In his attitude to the deepest problems of life and thought he stood nearest to Goethe, whom he often described as an optimistic fatalist. If happiness in the fullest sense is self-realization, his was a happy life. For he could say in the words of his master which he often used to repeat: 'Was man in der Jugend wünscht, hat man im Alter die Fülle'.

G. P. GOOCH.