

ALFRED CHILTON PEARSON

1861-1935

ALFRED CHILTON PEARSON was born on 8 October 1861 at 23 Campden Hill Square, London. He was the only child of R. H. Pearson, merchant. His mother, whose maiden name was Boswood, died while he was a schoolboy. He was educated at Highgate and King's College Schools. That he showed early proficiency in the classics was evidenced by many prizes, and that he had admirable teaching appears from a letter he wrote 10 December 1926: 'I have just received Xmas wishes from my old schoolmaster, *aetatis suae c. 90*, John Twentyman. He taught me the essence of what I know about Greek.' In 1879 he won a scholarship at Christ's College Cambridge, and went into residence fully prepared for University teaching. He was very fortunate in becoming a pupil of John Peile, afterwards Master then tutor of Christ's, already author of a work on Greek and Latin philology, and soon to become University Reader in Comparative Philology. Pearson went up to Cambridge well grounded in grammar, and Peile introduced him to Sanskrit and gave him a solid foundation for the linguistic studies of later life. Naturally, he obtained a first class in 1881 in the first part of the Tripos, and was also distinguished in the examination for the Chancellor's Medals. In 1883 this was followed by a first class in the second part, which included the study of Ancient Philosophy. This subject occupied his attention for a time, and he won the Hare Prize in 1889 with a study of Zeno and Cleanthes, which was published in 1891 by the Cambridge University Press, and has not been superseded by any more recent publication. In it he traced the gradual development of Stoic doctrine.

After taking his B.A. in 1884 he read for the Bar, and was called at Lincoln's Inn in 1885, apparently with the intention of following that profession. But on 15 October 1885

he married Miss Edith Maud Green, and settled in Cambridge Gardens. A daughter, who died in 1918, was born there in 1886, and his son in 1888. He had private pupils in classics for a time, but finally found it necessary to have a more reliable source of income, and took to school-mastering. Had he remained at the Bar, he would undoubtedly have become a sound lawyer, if nothing more, but education and research would have lost one who was a born teacher and gifted scholar. Of his work as second master at Bury St. Edmunds 1890-2, and as Sixth form master at Ipswich School 1892-3, it has been impossible to obtain any details. But at Dulwich College from September 1893 to April 1900 he took the Remove, the form below the Sixth, and gave the Sixth two hours a week, so that many who were under him remember him well. The present Provost of King's was one of his pupils. Another was Mr. W. Phelps, tutor of C.C.C., Oxford, who remarks on the skill with which he kept the attention of boys of very different types in one large form, though his teaching was austere in its thoroughness: he took a keen interest too in their games and 'we would not have been photographed without him'. Mr. H. F. Hose, who himself took the form over from Pearson in 1900 and has only recently retired from Dulwich, says:

I was never in Pearson's form. He took the Remove, a kind of Lower Sixth, and I was in the Sixth when he came to Dulwich, but he took us twice a week, mostly in Comparative Grammar and Philology. I don't think his lessons aroused any general enthusiasm—Pearson would never play to the gallery—but in my case at least they created an interest in Greek and Latin Syntax, and laid the foundation of what I hope was, in its way, a sound knowledge. He gave us a very careful and systematic exposition of principles which, at that time at least, were very little taught in schools. I remember particularly some notes on *Cum*-constructions in Latin which could hardly have been better and which I used afterwards in my own teaching. On one or two occasions after I took over, I wrote to him for information on points of grammar, and he always sent back very full and illuminating replies.

As a form-master, from what I heard, I should say he was rather painstaking and careful than inspiring, but there is no doubt he gave the better boys a good deal of sound learning, and, what is more, got them on well in composition at a stage when, as I found later, it is very difficult to produce much effect. When I asked him once, after he left, how he managed to get such good results in Verses he said, 'Well, I set them, and they do them.'

But composition in his hands became a very different thing from the mere farce that it had been before, when I was in that form. P. Hope, who took the Sixth form while Pearson was at Dulwich and for many years afterwards, had the very highest opinion of Pearson as a teacher, and, of course, as a scholar.

It is amusing to learn that his school nickname was due to his pronunciation of a word for 'snow' in some Indo-European language.

His years at Dulwich were thus usefully and happily spent, and there his younger daughter was born in 1897. His three children all married and he had six grandchildren, three boys and three girls, in whom he took a keen interest. Teaching absorbed most of his time and energy, and had he stayed longer at Dulwich he would not have been able to do so much for the interpretation of Greek Tragedy. But in 1900 he resigned his mastership. The reason was that by the death of his father (1893) and uncle (1898) he inherited considerable business responsibilities in London: the firm, which still exists, had to be carried on. He inquired of A. H. Gilkes, the headmaster, whether he could be allowed one day a week off, but Gilkes felt that he could not grant an exceptional favour like that to one of his staff, unless he was prepared to grant it to others who might not have so good a reason. So he gave up teaching—it was to be for nineteen years—and bought a house at Warlingham, high up in the Surrey hills, and in those days anything but suburban. For some time he went to town daily, but had his evenings and week-ends free for study; and as time went on he was not obliged to go up so often and could devote himself more to his life's work. He joined the National Liberal Club so as to have a *pied-à-terre* in London, and kept

in touch with teaching by examining regularly for the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board from 1900, and for the Civil Service Commission from 1914. It was through association with him on Board work that the present writer first met him, and began a friendship which, according to Pearson, lasted twenty years: if it was not quite so long, the rest of this memoir is based on personal knowledge.

At this point it should be emphasized that he was never a mere book-worm. At Cambridge he was a keen oarsman, and helped C. W. Moore, who rowed four times for Cambridge, to bring Christ's to the fore on the river, and afterwards he hardly ever missed the Boat Race. He was not only in the College VIII but the XI; he also played lawn tennis for the College, and belonged to the various social clubs, including the O.C.M. In the early nineties on a family holiday at Westward Ho! he was interested in watching golf, then comparatively new to England: he took the game up and made it his chief recreation in middle and later years, varied by walking and bicycling. He loved the English country-side, and the annual family holiday took him sometimes as far as Scotland or Wales. A. R. Ainsworth, a former Dulwich pupil, then a scholar of King's and afterwards at the Board of Education, was at least twice his companion and talked what was 'Greek' to the children.

In 1887 the *Classical Review* was started, and Pearson contributed to its second number a note on the *Androtion* of Demosthenes. In 1891 he had a note on Pindar; forty years later (1931) his last contribution was on Pindar's 'whetstone'. Between those dates lay the active life of a scholar, which for fruitfulness has not often been surpassed. There have been many more polymathic, but few have had a clearer aim or succeeded more fully in completing their life's work. He did not, however, neglect his early work on ancient philosophy. Naturally, after the appearance of his own book, he was selected in 1892 to review Troost's *Zeno of Citium*, and in later years he reviewed the three editions of Diels' *Pre-Socratics* and his *Herakleitos*, as well as Professor

Burnet's works in the same field: in 1898 he disposed of Walter Headlam's parallel to the *Logia* by pointing out that Lucian was referring to Stoic utterances.

Nor did he fail to keep pace with discovery. If he did not write on the *Constitution of Athens*, he introduced it into his Dulwich teaching: in 1891 he contributed to the *Classical Review* notes on Herodas, and in February 1898 on Bacchylides, published in the previous November. It was in 1893 that he printed his first emendation of Sophocles (*O.T.* 725), which in his edition of 1924 he mentions with an *olim conieci*. His school editions (Pitt Press) of the *Helena*, 1903, *Heraclidae*, 1907, and *Phoenissae*, 1909, are not as well known as they deserve to be. Speaking from wide experience, Mr. Hose says: 'I do not know any school editions which come up to them. Both introductions and notes are full of sane judgement and criticism as well as sound learning.' Thus Dulwich benefited from Pearson even after he had gone.

A great feature of his notes is their excellence on grammatical points. Mr. Hose remarks: 'It is a pity Pearson never produced a text-book of Greek and Latin Grammar for schools. Such a book is badly needed, and he would have done it so well.' His *Phoenissae* was reviewed in the *Classical Review* by Mr. J. U. Powell of St. John's College, Oxford, and soon afterwards, when Mr. Powell produced an edition of the same play, Pearson was chosen to review it. Neither editor had reason to complain of his reviewer. The Olympian wrangles of Blass and Wilamowitz were not imitated in England!

The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press then gave Pearson three tasks in succession. First in 1907 he abridged Jebb's *Ajax*. Secondly, they placed in his hands Walter Headlam's verse translation and incomplete commentary on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: this came out in 1910. Finally, what was still more important, they entrusted him with the task of editing the Fragments of Sophocles, begun by Jebb, and carried on by Headlam, placing in his hands the

material left by the two scholars, which was not, however, very extensive. More than 100 fragments had been added since Nauck's edition, and the number exceeded 1,100. To this work he devoted the major part of his quiet life at Warlingham: the work in three volumes, *nonum pressus in annum*, established his reputation when it came out in 1917. It was a worthy finish to a great edition. Next the Delegates of the Oxford University Press invited Pearson to produce a text of Sophocles in the Oxford series. Again he took the time necessary for an exceedingly difficult task. Sophocles is an author with whom every word seems to have unusual value: it is often easier to detect something wrong than to correct the text. A century before him Peter Elmsley had first applied the Laurentian MS. to the text of Sophocles: Cobet had afterwards laid down that it was the sole original authority, and Jebb had only very reluctantly departed from it. But the discovery of papyri in Egypt had destroyed superstitious reverence for a single manuscript in any classical author, and it was Pearson's task to make fuller use of other sources, especially Paris A. When in 1924 his colleague, Professor Housman, had to review the *Sophoclis Fabulae*, he said:

After his edition of Sophocles' fragments in 1917, Dr. Pearson was marked out as the English scholar best qualified to undertake the recension of the seven tragedies: and in discharge of the duty very properly laid upon him by the Oxford Press, he has produced what is much the best critical edition of Sophocles now in existence, the most complete and the most judicious. It is good fortune which many authors have never encountered and Sophocles has often missed, to be edited by one who unites the character of an acute grammarian, a vigilant critic, and an honest man.

It is safe to say that never in his life has Professor Housman spoken of any scholar in such terms; and though he goes on to accept no more than half a dozen of Pearson's fifty emendations, it is high praise from him. Before Pearson was finally laid by through failing health, he was able to explain and defend his readings, in the *Classical Quarterly* for 1928, 1929, and 1930, on four out of the seven plays.

Every scholar will agree that he has contributed greatly to the text of the great dramatist, though of course many will dissent from him on this point or that. To the present writer the *Antigone* seems the play the text of which he has most improved.

In 1919 the quiet and fruitful *secessus* of Warlingham came to an end. He had become famous *malgré lui*. An unfortunate appointment, made before the war, had deprived Liverpool University of a Professor of Greek during the war. When it was over, H. A. Ormerod, the able assistant, returned, but the subject had suffered, and a new Gladstone Professor was urgently needed in 1919. On 24 May Pearson wrote: 'I am becoming a candidate for the Greek chair at Liverpool. Rather a ridiculous adventure at my time of life! I did not even know the post was advertised, until I got a letter from Postgate saying it had been suggested to him that I might stand.' J. P. Postgate was then Professor of Latin at Liverpool, and warmly supported Pearson for the vacancy. On 8 July he was elected, and on 8 September moved to Etonfield, King's Gap, Hoylake, a bracing situation by the sea, and close to excellent golf links, to him no small attraction. Besides the labour involved in this uprooting, there was the unusual excitement that on 9 August his second daughter Margaret was married to Mr. J. T. Saunders, tutor of Christ's, and on 18 September his son Robert was married at Mold.

After the long interval he threw himself into teaching once more with added zest. His colleagues and the University generally soon became aware that a strong and all pervasive influence had come among them, determined to vindicate for Classics—properly taught—a fair share in the scheme of higher education. He was only at Liverpool just over two years, but he immediately brought the subject back into the place it had occupied under J. L. Myres.

On 29 January 1920 he delivered his inaugural lecture on 'The Permanent Value of Greek in Education'. Just before, he wrote: 'There seems no other possible subject.

Of course Greek has always been a feeble growth here, but I shall do what I can to encourage people to take it, without descending to the sugar-plum game. It must be the language or nothing.' By October the number of Honour Students had risen from three to eight, and one of them, Mr. R. B. Onians, was soon to follow him with an exhibition to Trinity College, Cambridge. He was indefatigable in stimulating interest in the Classics in the district, and in promoting lectures for schools: he became President of the local branch of the Classical Association, and also of a reconstituted pre-war society called *Θεσσαλονίκη*, which met to read Greek plays. The one regret he had was the resignation of Postgate, who went back to Cambridge, but he was greatly pleased with the election of D. A. Slater in his place, especially as Slater also settled at Hoylake and their wives became intimate friends. Golf was a constant pastime. Thus he writes (12 August 1921): 'As Saunders is very keen on golf, I don't make much progress with Sophocles or next session's lectures.' Golf and Hoylake air kept him in excellent health.

Slater was just resigning the secretaryship of the Classical Association, as also was his colleague P. N. Ure. At the Newcastle meeting of 1920, Pearson, who had been on the Council of the Association since 1917, was elected joint secretary along with the present writer, who thus was for some years in constant correspondence with him. It fell to Pearson to edit the Association's *Proceedings*, which he did admirably for three years, but there was no side of their activities which he did not beneficially affect. One of the first things he did was to suggest the invitation of French scholars to the meetings of the Association, as a result of an encounter with M. Jean Malys, the amiable and active representative of the *Association Guillaume Budé*. Thus Professor Mazon came to the memorable and delightful meeting at Cambridge, 1921, and since then French scholars have often attended such meetings. In the same year he did the Classical Association a great service by inducing H. A. Ormerod to take over the onerous post of Treasurer.

It should be mentioned that on taking up his work at Liverpool he proceeded to the degree of Litt.D., Cambridge, as was fitting. His comment on the abolition of Compulsory Greek for the Arts degree at Oxford was:

I was not surprised at your Oxford result, and on the whole I believe it was better it came as it did, rather than that it should be forced upon the University by outside pressure. I think we are now at the bottom of the trough, and that when our materialists discover that 'scientific'—a misapplied epithet—education is not the gold mine which they expected, we shall have a reaction in favour of Humanism.

His stay at Liverpool was shorter than he expected: for in 1921, on the death of Henry Jackson, he was induced to become a candidate for the chair of Greek at Cambridge which, in the opinion of his friends, was his natural goal. In October and November the usual *praelections*—since abolished—were read by the candidates, among whom were Sir William Ridgeway and Professor Platt. His own was on 'Ajax 961-973 and the Dramatic Unity of the Play': on 26 May of the following year he read it to the Oxford Philological Society. Characteristically he wrote: 'It doesn't worry me at all now that I have definitely put aside any expectation of success.' But the editor of Sophocles' Fragments had established his reputation as a scholar, the Gladstone Professor had shown that he was still as competent a teacher as ever, and on 15 November the completer of Jebb's work was elected to Jebb's chair.

The move to 17 Hills Avenue, Cambridge, took place early in 1922. His inaugural lecture on 3 March was entitled 'Verbal Scholarship and the Growth of some Abstract Terms'. In it he strongly criticized Dr. Farnell's recent tirade against formalism and pedantry in classical teaching: this, Pearson said, was 'the cry for more about Mycenae and less of the verbs in -μι'. He scouted the idea that any one can get a real understanding of Greek thought by using a translation, however good.

Thought and speech are inextricably interwoven, and the intensive study of words is necessary for correct thinking. τοὺς τε

λόγους, as Diodotus says in Thuc. iii. 42, ὅστις διαμάχεται μὴ διδασκάλους τῶν πραγμάτων γίγνεσθαι, ἢ ἀξύνετός ἐστιν, ἢ διὰ τι αὐτῷ διαφέρει: 'whosoever contends that words are not interpreters of facts either is a fool or has a private interest to serve'. When we call to mind the habitual inaccuracy of speech to which we are all liable; the disastrous consequences of wilful or unconscious exaggeration, and the scarcely smaller havoc wrought by timid or scornful ironies; the painful inefficiencies of those who have never learnt to express themselves at all; and above all the tragical misunderstandings of another's words which sear the hearts and embitter the friendships of honest men, then indeed we become aware of the value of clear and accurate speech. Just as language is the direct channel which conveys to another the workings of the inner man; so the more effective that instrument, the more intimately do we share the feelings, motives, and meditations of the speaker or writer. That Greek is eminently such an instrument few will deny. But those who study the monuments of Greek literature must seek to understand them not loosely or vaguely, not catching at the general drift of the passage and leaving the details to take care of themselves, but delving, searching and pondering until the truth is laid bare. That is the only method; for there are no short cuts.

It was a great joy to him to be back in Cambridge and soon afterwards to be elected an Honorary Fellow of Christ's and a Governor of Dulwich College. However busy he never seemed to forget anything. In the middle of the move he wrote asking for an agendum at the Council of the Classical Association to propose congratulations to Professor Gildersleeve on his ninetieth birthday.

It was characteristic of him too that he did not lay down his secretaryship of the Association till he had secured a successor in M. P. Charlesworth and convinced the Senior Tutor that this would not unduly interfere with Charlesworth's college duties: there was always something peculiarly persuasive about Pearson. You felt that anything which *he* recommended was reasonable and right. He enjoyed the society of Trinity College, of which he became a Fellow, and was happy in the rooms allotted to him. Mrs. Pearson had the added happiness of being near her married daughter, Mrs. Saunders.

Work flowed in on Pearson at Cambridge: in 1923 he lectured at the Royal Institution, and in 1924 at the Midland Institute, Birmingham: 'I went to Birmingham to lecture last week. It was rather formidable, some nine hundred people who nevertheless behaved very nicely.' In 1924 he was elected to the British Academy. On 8 April he wrote: 'The last proofs of the Sophocles text have now gone to Press. I am glad to have done it, but at the same time dread its publication.' In September he wrote from Hunstanton to say how much he enjoyed seeing his son-in-law and his two little girls of ten and seven, and on 29 September returned for the sixth centenary of Michaelhouse, the predecessor of Trinity College.

On 6 February 1925 he delivered a paper at Leeds, called Εὐριπίδαριστοφάνειν, full of interest for the development of Greek Drama.

In 1926 he was greatly distressed by the tragic death of Postgate in a cycling accident, and he himself began to be troubled with a nervous affection which hampered his writing. It was only with great difficulty that he went to Manchester in October to receive the honorary degree of Litt.D. For two years he struggled on with his lectures, finding them more and more of a burden. On 9 May 1927 he wrote: 'The Regius Professor of Physic, Rolleston, tells me that there is no reason why I should not continue with my ordinary work just as usual. But they all treat it rather lightly, and I am satisfied in my own case that I am on the downward grade.'

Later, in 1928, he resigned his chair, and after Mrs. Pearson's death in 1930, his health completely failed. In 1932 he went to live with his son at Hunstanton, till in the autumn of last year he was moved to Queen's Gate, Kensington, where he died on 2 January last in his seventy-fourth year. It was sad that he had not a longer time in which to enjoy the honours he had won; but his work was finished, and he will be remembered as not the least among the successors of Bentley and Porson.

He was a strong and convinced defender of the place of Classics in education, but he was no narrow pedant. He loved a good novel: Meredith, Hardy, Henry James, and later Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy gave him great pleasure. He enjoyed a Bernard Shaw play. He loved the simple pleasures of home and country life. He had a genius for friendship. There was no trouble he would not take for a friend, and he had a wonderful knack of suggesting suitable men for particular work, as he showed in all his connexion with the Classical Association.

Those who were admitted to intimacy with him came to value more and more the balance of his judgement and the soundness of his advice. Originally a Liberal, he wrote in 1923: 'I have ceased to be a Liberal and expect to end as a crusted Tory.' He had resigned his membership of the National Liberal Club and joined the Athenaeum. To his son, who can remember his anxiety during the Boer War, he wrote in 1914: 'This is a terrible crime against humanity, but the cause of freedom and relief from military despotism is so great that we have no alternative but to fight to the bitter end, even if it involves our own destruction.'

By choice a follower of the *fallentis semita vitae*, he could not help becoming distinguished, yet his modesty was so genuine that he could never believe there was any merit in his work. Those who loved him for what he was were glad that his long years of faithful devotion to the Classics were rewarded by the success and recognition which he never expected or thought he deserved.

He was essentially a Hellenist, but when one recalls his character, there are just two words—and those are Latin—which describe it exactly: they are *pietas* and *auctoritas*.

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