

Obituary Notice

ROBIN GEORGE COLLINGWOOD. Born 1889: Died 9 January 1943

Robin George Collingwood was born in 1889, and passed away, in the shadow of his native Lakeland hills, on 9th January 1943. His death at so early an age robs this Society of one of its most gifted and brilliant members, and it may fairly be said that his genius had burnt itself out. To understand the remarkable qualities which made of Collingwood a unique archaeologist, it is necessary to appreciate his antecedents. His father, William Gershom Collingwood, was an author, an artist, an archaeologist, and the secretary and biographer of Ruskin, who was steeped in the extreme delicacy of perception which marks and sometimes mars Ruskin's work and whose landscapes, like his exquisite Lakeland tales, combine brilliant technique with vivid and powerful imagination. All these gifts the son inherited and applied them to disciplined learning with inspiring results. His education at Rugby, followed at Oxford by Firsts in Moderations and Greats, took conventional lines, though the pupil's views of the matter, later reflected in his Autobiography, would have somewhat startled some of his mentors. His versatility at least was early appreciated: for while Pembroke College elected him as Fellow and Tutor, destined to teach philosophy, Haverfield picked out his artistic, archaeological, and scholarly gifts and chose him to illustrate topographical articles on the Roman forts of northern Britain and presently to collaborate in producing and illustrating a complete edition of the Roman inscriptions of Britain. When the latter work, now reaching its final stages in yet another editor's hands, is published, the learned world will know how much it owes to Collingwood's superb draughtsmanship which always equals and often surpasses his father's drawing, famously reproduced in *Northumbrian Crosses*. His preoccupation with topography and inscriptions, controlled and stimulated by the philosopher's outlook, did not preclude Collingwood's interest in other fields of Romano-British studies. His passion for synthesis led him to survey the whole and to write some papers of fundamental importance. His severe corrections, on numismatic evidence, of flights of fancy concerning the late-Roman occupation and on literary evidence or *Quellenforschung* of traditions concerning Hadrian's Wall, are now accepted as axiomatic: few remember their telling effect when they were new. Gradually his net swept wider, taking in the entire archaeology of the province in his *Archaeology of Roman Britain*, its social and cultural significance in his *Roman Britain*, a brilliant study which held its own even against Haverfield's superb Academy essay, and its history in the Romano-British section of *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*. So much a student of Roman Britain may admire, and then turn to delve among the innumerable and obscure sources for that study which Collingwood illuminated with lavish pen. But there were many others, students in other fields, who owed him as much if not more. His University lectures and tutorials in philosophy were the delight of those who received them, for they possessed a lucidity and a sense of direction altogether rare among his academic contemporaries. Indeed their lucidity and exquisite delivery were sometimes their undoing: for the more brilliant academic minds, forgetting that lucidity is harder to achieve and is later developed than subtlety, were apt to mistake his assured manner for sophistry, little knowing the broad foundation of polymathy and the acutely sensitive mind upon which it was based. Time will

alter that impression as his works are read and appreciated. Where there is so much to praise, there can be little room for blame. If Collingwood had a fault, it was that of over-generosity to his students and fellow scholars. He used to say that he spent much time in 'boiling other people's kettles'; and only those who knew him intimately, caught glimpses of his post-bag, saw how many proofs of other works lay upon his study table, or discussed problems with him will know how true this was. A problem put before him, or facts which he perceived as setting or answering a problem, were analysed and dissected by his penetrating bird-like mind with what often seemed uncanny speed and divination. No one knew until the latter years what this cost him in nervous energy and cerebral overstrain. But there was a time when to his friends and fellow workers his presence was a lighthouse and the outer world black. Human sympathy he had in abundance, combined with intense regard for truth and hatred of shams in human relationships. The intensity manifests itself in his *Autobiography*, while shams are unmasked with pitiless logic side by side with a call to kindlier virtues in his *New Leviathan*. *The New Leviathan* is his last work, of which the closing chapters were written under the shadow of Armageddon, when he himself was a physical wreck, tortured by cerebral haemorrhage and able to write often only a few words a day. It has been variously hailed, and not a few tributes have already been paid to its power and value as a guide to social conduct. It is indeed a superb analysis of the foundations of society, sufficiently provocative to outlast our generation and to establish its author among the serious English social philosophers. But Collingwood's kindness, acumen, and versatility are wrapped up in the hearts of his friends and in the memory of his contemporaries.

I. A. R.