

V.—MR. WILLIAM WEAVER TOMLINSON.
AN OBITUARY NOTICE.

By JOHN OXBERRY.

[Read on the 28th February, 1917.]

The late William Weaver Tomlinson was born on the 5th October, 1858, at Driffield, in Yorkshire, and spent much of his boyhood in and around the delightful old country town of Beverley. The noble minster of Beverley is famous alike for its beauty and its history; the narrow streets of the town, with their time-mellowed brick buildings, and quaint nooks and corners, are eloquent in their suggestiveness of the life of vanished centuries. There are parts of Beverley where on a quiet afternoon a visitor would scarcely be startled to see a couple of sturdy fellows come trotting along with a sedan chair swinging between them, and where swords and ruffles, and patches and powdered hair would hardly seem out of date. The atmosphere of such a place must have had a charm for a youth constituted as Mr. Tomlinson was, and, whether he was clearly conscious of it or not, must have exerted some influence—may indeed have been the determining influence which ultimately led him to dedicate the leisure hours of his life to the fascinating labour of endeavouring to illuminate the obscurities of the past.

Mr. Tomlinson was educated in a Beverley school, but his studies there were interrupted when he was thirteen years of age, by an event which was destined to have an important bearing in shaping his future career. His father, Mr. John Post Tomlinson, was secretary of the Hull and Selby railway. This line was purchased by the North Eastern railway company in 1872. Mr. Tomlinson left school while the arrangements for the amalgamation of the two railways were in progress, and for a

few months travelled daily with his father to Hull, where most of his time was spent in the library of the Lyceum. Here, to quote his own words, he 'had the most glorious time of his life.' He read Scott, Dickens, Lover, Wilkie Collins, and other masters of fiction, and with the aid of the productions of their genius, laid the foundation of that wide knowledge of general literature which is revealed in his writings.

When the amalgamation of the two railways was completed, Mr. Tomlinson's father was given a position with the North Eastern railway company at Newcastle. This involved the removal of the Tomlinson household to Tyneside. Mr. W. W. Tomlinson was fourteen years of age when he came northward, and for a brief period resumed the life of a schoolboy at Newcastle grammar school. He cannot, however, have attended that famous old educational institution for more than a few months, as he was not quite fifteen years old when he entered the service of the North Eastern railway company as a clerk in the accountant's office at Newcastle. In this employment the remainder of his working life was spent. But, to use Charles Lamb's expressive phrase, the desk's dead wood did not enter his soul. The desire for intellectual culture had taken too firm a hold upon him. He settled on Tyneside at an impressionable period of his life, a period when the perceptive faculties of the youth who is dowered with mental and spiritual gifts, are on the eve of their great awakening to the beauty and wonder of the world around; when he begins to hunger after knowledge, and is every day confronted with a fresh problem, or fascinated by a new object of interest.

Mr. Tomlinson's earliest appearance before the public as an author was in 1881, when he was 23 years of age. The little book by which he sought to win the suffrages of north-country readers was a small collection of verse which he appropriately entitled *First Fruits*. It contained work of which he had no reason to be ashamed, as well as lines which bore evidence that he had not



WILLIAM WEAVER TOMLINSON

(From a photograph taken in 1894.)

as yet mastered the medium he employed to express the dreams and thoughts that struggled for utterance. This is merely saying, of course, that Mr. Tomlinson's *First Fruits* did not differ from the first fruits of almost every other aspirant for literary honours. I refer to the book here, however, not to appraise its value as literature, but because the publication of such a volume at so youthful a period of his life demonstrates the early bent of his mind towards the pursuit of letters. The work in itself is of minor importance. It did not produce a single ripple on the great stream of English literature, but it proved that nature had endowed Mr. Tomlinson with the temperament and feelings of a poet, and was an indication of the early promptings of an honourable ambition which in the fulness of time was to win for him a recognized position of distinction among north-country writers.

At first sight there seems little affinity between antiquarian or topographical pursuits and poetry. 'Dr. Dryasdust' is the conventional label attached by the general public to the complete antiquary, and it is easy to believe that those who credit the Dryasdust tradition will be ready to regard susceptibility to poetic impulse as a hindrance rather than a help to progress in historical research. A more mistaken idea has seldom taken root in the popular mind. Sir Walter Scott provides us with an outstanding example of the kinship that exists between poetry and antiquarian studies. To be able to chronicle events, decipher inscriptions and tabulate changes is not sufficient to enable us to comprehend the past. However wide and accurate his knowledge may be, that antiquary or historian who is destitute of poetic imagination and vision, lacks one of the chief elements of efficiency when he attempts to portray the past. What is obscure he must be able to make clear; what is dead he must re-vitalize. He must put flesh on the bones and life in the body if he wishes either to understand or be understood; and to do these things thoroughly

is only possible where imagination, controlled and guided by correct and detailed knowledge, takes up the task of recreating and reanimating the life and movements of the generations that are gone. This was the spirit in which Sir Walter Scott worked. He was a man of genius, but there have been many humbler men, who, within the limitations imposed upon them by less exalted gifts, have pursued a similar course, and one of these was William Weaver Tomlinson whose career as historian and antiquary we are reviewing to-night.

Mr. Tomlinson has himself told us that soon after his arrival in Newcastle our romantic borderland began to exercise its fascinating influence over him. Its story appealed to him, and bred the desire for a closer acquaintance with the scenes where the story was laid. The history and topography of Northumberland thus became one of the dominating subjects of his thoughts. And, like the county, he found the town in which he had settled was replete with historical interest. Many of the old architectural features in the Side and in other parts of Newcastle were still standing to arrest the attention of all who harboured a desire to probe into the secrets of the past. In 1877, four years prior to the publication of his *First Fruits*, he had become a member of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society. The books he read, and the leading line of study he followed were clearly indicated when, ten years later, the jubilee exhibition was held in Newcastle. The attractions of the exhibition brought a steady flow of visitors to the city. Many of these were strangers both to the place and its history, and their influx rendered a handy guide to Newcastle a thing to be desired. Several were issued, and one of them was from the pen of Mr. Tomlinson. His *Guide to Newcastle* was the first book in which he sought to retail the knowledge he had been carefully garnering from the pages of our north-country historians, and the *Guide* was but the prelude, as he announced in his introductory

remarks, to another similar work of a more extensive character upon which he was engaged. This was his *Comprehensive Guide to Northumberland*, which was duly finished and published in 1888. It bears a title that is well fitted to describe the variety of the information it supplies. Anyone who has taken this volume with him as a companion on a tour through Northumberland will be ready to acknowledge that Mr. Tomlinson did not err in prefixing the word comprehensive to the title of his book. It contains along with a concise narrative, plentifully interspersed with anecdote and legend, of the chief incidents in the crowded history of Northumberland, a supply of information that must be of genuine service and of practical value to students of botany and geology. The book was well received, and after the lapse of nearly thirty years it continues to be recognized as one of the best of its kind ever placed in the hands of the public.

Between the appearance of his *Guide to Northumberland*, in 1888, and of his last and most notable work, the *History of the North Eastern Railway Company*, in 1914, Mr. Tomlinson prepared and issued several other publications bearing upon north-country history. These are specified in the bibliography appended to this obituary notice, and need not be referred to here, further than to say that while they are attractive and readable in form and style, they are at the same time characterized by a carefulness of statement and a sufficiency of detail to render them valuable for purposes of reference to the antiquary or student of history.

The crowning achievement, however, of his literary labours is his great book on the North Eastern railway. Unfortunately, it proved to be his last. The best work is the result of enthusiasm and persistence. In his pursuit of historical data to illustrate the subject to which he devoted the last years of his life, Mr. Tomlinson was as tireless as he was ardent. He equipped

himself for his task—or labour of love, as we might more correctly term it—by a long course of research. His utmost energies were bent on its accomplishment. To this book, one who was very near and dear to him has said, he gave ‘many of the best years of his life, and considered they were well spent.’ Those who know the book will agree with the verdict. The years were well spent which enriched local literature with a volume which though nominally a history of a railway company is in reality an elaborate review of the rise and progress of various systems of conveyance and locomotion, with an epitomized account of the industrial growth which brought with it the need for the change. The value of the book was recognized by the public, and the members of the Pen and Palette Club, at Newcastle, voiced the general appreciation of local lovers of sound literary craftsmanship when they entertained Mr. Tomlinson to a complimentary supper on the completion of his undertaking.

But the books that Mr. Tomlinson published represent a part only of what readers owed to his industry and attainments. He lived a life of incessant literary activity, and the newspapers and periodicals of this district bear ample witness to the zeal with which he pursued his favourite studies. If he was eager to acquire knowledge, he was equally ready to impart it, either personally to an acquaintance who sought his aid, or by means of lectures or the press to a wider constituency. To enumerate the whole of his contributions to the periodical publications of his day is not feasible here. We must content ourselves with the statement that he wrote articles descriptive of Northumbrian villages; papers on Northumbrian walking tours; and sketches of the annals of Northumbrian castles and churches. He embodied old legends in verse, as in his *Ballad of the Fridstool*, and his *Monks of Blanchland*, and added further confirmation of the existence within him of a deep vein of poetic sentiment

by the publication in magazines and newspapers of a good deal of poetry dealing with the beautiful, the tender and the fanciful sides of nature and of life. He also essayed the short story with success, as in 'The Watchman's Christmas Eve,' which appeared in *Banks o' Tyne*, a South Shields annual for 1893.

Constituted as he was, it was natural that he should become connected with such a body of seekers after intellectual improvement as the Tyneside students' association. This association, the outcome of the enthusiasm aroused by some of the early university extension lectures and lecturers, did excellent service in the eighties of last century. Mr. Tomlinson was an active and prominent supporter of it, and in the hall of the Literary and Philosophical Society at Newcastle and elsewhere, gave the members and others who were interested, the benefit of his literary studies by lectures on such subjects as the *Poets of Newcastle*, the *Humorous Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, and *Canons of Poetic Criticism*.

As already mentioned, he became a member of the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1877, and to the day of his death he remained an attached friend of the institution. In 1890 he was elected to the committee of the society, and between that date and 1913 he served on the committee for a total period of fifteen years. In the lecture session of the autumn of 1894 he gave a lecture to the members on *Life in Northumberland in the Sixteenth Century*, which was subsequently expanded and published in book form.

It was at the meeting held on 28th November, 1888—the year of the publication of his *Guide to Northumberland*—that he was elected a member of our society. His services were soon requisitioned on behalf of his fellow members. In 1890 he succeeded the late Mr. William Lyall as librarian. He held this office until 1893, when the pressure of other duties compelled him to resign. Three years afterwards he was elected

on the council of the society, and with the exception of the year 1909, he remained a member of it up to the day of his death. Our records show how often members were indebted to him for papers on various subjects; and if in later years his contributions were less frequent, this was due not to any diminution of interest on his part in the objects of our society, or in its welfare, but to the monopoly of his time by the labour involved in preparing his book on the North Eastern railway.

Mr. Tomlinson married Mdle. Marie Sylvie Philippine Vanlaton of Lille, France, by whom he is survived. He also left a son who entered the army in the early days of the war, and is now serving 'somewhere in France' as an officer in the Durham Light Infantry. Another child, a daughter pre-deceased him, and her death, coming unexpectedly after a brief illness, and at a time when he, himself, was far from being in a robust condition of health, was a distressing blow to him.

He died on the 26th November, 1916. Three days later he was buried in the new cemetery at Whitley-bay. It was an appropriate spot for his grave to be made, for it is in the heart of the district of which he was the historian; within sound of the waves of the wild North Sea, whose voice had thrilled and charmed him so often, and close alongside of Whitley links, where, as he himself has told us, he loved to wander, and in imagination commune

'With those who, in the shadowy far-off day
Dwelt here before us.'

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