



GEORGE MACAULAY TREVELYAN.

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The Society has lost one of its most distinguished members by the death of Dr. G. M. Trevelyan. The loss is twofold, for Trevelyan was both the most widely known of modern British historians and a devoted Northumbrian who knew and loved the countryside and the traditions of our northern counties.

He was born on February 16th 1876 into a family distinguished alike for intellectual achievement and for public service. Sir George Otto Trevelyan, his father, made a distinguished career for himself in administration and in politics, and was also an able historian. Many early influences coincided to induce the son to imitate the historical interests of his father. The example of his great uncle, Lord Macaulay, was always an inspiration; indeed Trevelyan's greatest works, the three books on the England of Queen Anne, were deliberately formed upon Macaulay's model. At home in Northumberland the countryside was rich with the remains of early times and local folklore and tradition fascinating and exciting to an impressionable boy. When Sir George Trevelyan inherited Wallington his son could browse freely among a large collection of books, representing the accumulations not only of Lord Macaulay and the Trevelyans, but also the library of their Northumbrian predecessors, Fenwicks and Blacketts.

Trevelyan's interest in the past was fostered and encouraged at school. At Harrow he found masters who appreciated and helped to guide his work, and when he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1893 he was an able, if precocious, youth of seventeen, already determined to make

history his calling and imbued with romantic conceptions of the nature and importance of his subject.

At Cambridge he found that these conceptions were not those which predominated in the historical school, for the reigning historians, men like Seeley and Bury, emphasised the "scientific" nature of history, calling for a meticulous and detailed scholarship which took little account of graceful expression or the re-creation of atmosphere. Yet the society in which the young Trevelyan found himself was in many ways remarkable. Among the historians Maitland, Acton and Cunningham influenced Trevelyan's development, while outside the historical school Cambridge at the turn of the century included a galaxy of intellectual ability. Into this society Trevelyan was welcomed, and something of his quality is illuminated by his associates; the young man who numbered Bertrand Russell and Vaughan Williams among his friends was both able and likeable.

Although Cambridge now became a second home to him, he never relinquished his love of the north country. Many happy vacation days were spent in walking the hills and the moors of the Border, and his deep love of the countryside emerges again and again in his writings. Perhaps it is enough to say here that the Northumbrian who can read Trevelyan's essay on the Middle Marches without being moved must be dull indeed. His interest was not a passive one; even if he had not achieved distinction in other fields we in this society would still remember with gratitude the part he played in preserving the Housesteads section of Hadrian's Wall, which remains the most impressive monument surviving from the Roman occupation of Britain.

Of course Trevelyan's fame rests on wider ground than this, for he was undoubtedly the most distinguished British historian of his generation. The honours which he received attest to the high regard in which his work was held. In 1927 he became Regius Professor at Cambridge, in 1940 he was appointed to the Order of Merit. Ten years later he became Master of Trinity, and in 1949 the University of Durham

appointed him Chancellor, a most unusual distinction for a scholar to receive. Nor were these distinctions undeserved, for Trevelyan's services to history were very great.

He has of course to some extent suffered from the fate which overtakes all historians, in that part of his work has been superseded by more recent research by other scholars. Yet it remains true that a great deal of what Trevelyan wrote is well worth reading. This is particularly valid in the case of his two great trilogies, the Queen Anne books and the Garibaldi books. Although the specialist may find much that he would regard now as old fashioned in these books, as an introduction to these subjects they remain most useful, particularly as no later writer on them has equalled Trevelyan in powers of exposition. Some of the weaknesses in Trevelyan's work must be attributed to his methods; he was never a Namierite, and his interest was not chiefly in the minutiae of the historian's task. Yet it is unreasonable to judge Trevelyan's work by standards of meticulous and painstakingly detailed labour on sources, which are recent innovations into historical scholarship, and more illuminating to set his achievements in their right perspective.

We are accustomed now to the fact that history occupies an honoured place in our schools and universities, so accustomed in fact that it is difficult for us to appreciate how different the situation was even at the beginning of the present century. Then modern history was but little regarded in most schools, and often taught, if taught at all, in a perfunctory and highly inaccurate form. In the universities history was only beginning to emerge as a respectable academic discipline in its own right. Many historians contributed to the transformation in the standing of history which this century has seen in this country, but it would be difficult to single out any other scholar whose contribution was as important as that of G. M. Trevelyan. He was largely responsible for rescuing the writing and the teaching of history from the pseudo-scientific servitude in which it languished at the turn of the century in the twin shackles of

scientific progress and Teutonic scholarship. To many of the leading historians in Britain at that time skill in exposition in order to make history attractive and interesting to the reader was at best unimportant, at worst a dangerous snare for the scholar. Their ideals of punctilious scholarship were admirable enough but they failed to appreciate that ability in detailed research work is not the only skill required of the historian. In his autobiographical essay Trevelyan recalled his indignation when he heard Seeley, then Regius Professor at Cambridge, dismiss Macaulay and Carlyle as charlatans, because their standards of research and accuracy seemed to him unsatisfactory. Yet the fact remains that Seeley never produced any work which has been as influential as the writings of Macaulay and Carlyle, and his books are now almost forgotten.

From the beginning of his career Trevelyan refused to accept a crabbed and confined interpretation of the functions of the historian, and expended very great pains on the literary aspect of his work. His pains were well repaid; because of the trouble he took in achieving a good style of writing his books reached a wider public than those of any other historian since Macaulay. His books are eminently readable and possess considerable literary merit. Their prose is remarkably lucid and well balanced, but there is more to it than that, for to this clarity of expression is allied a gift for the re-creation of atmosphere or feeling, which is compelling and convincing. Two good examples of this gift are his account of the death of Queen Anne in "The Peace and the Protestant Succession", and in very different vein his lyrical description of the Border countryside at the beginning of the essay on the Middle Marches.

The importance of Trevelyan's ability to present the past in a readable and attractive form was very great for the development of historical studies in this country. From a narrow professional viewpoint Trevelyan's work played a major part in the extension and the growing prestige of historical studies in schools and universities. Trevelyan's

contribution was not confined to his own writings, for his generous and friendly nature led him to encourage and assist a whole generation of historians. An impressive testimony to Trevelyan's help is to be found in a study of the dedications and acknowledgments of the major historical works of his pupils and associates.

But there is much more to Trevelyan's achievement than any narrow professional assessment. His books, particularly the general works such as his "History of England" and his "English Social History", reached a very wide public, and indeed continue to do so. They have been the channel whereby thousands of men and women in all spheres of society have been given an interest in history, and this is something which far transcends any of Trevelyan's services in a narrow or local view. In telling so many different people something of the way in which British institutions have grown and developed Trevelyan performed a very important public service, and one which few scholars can have equalled. It is for this that G. M. Trevelyan's memory should most be honoured, and it is but just to apply to him the words he used of Macaulay,

"the service that he rendered to Clio by making her known to the people was the most essential and pertinent of all . . ."

