

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Colleague and Erector of Buildings

IT WAS at the close of 1933 that I passed from grateful and admiring pupil of Dr. Wheeler Robinson to be his no less grateful and admiring colleague. The relationship continued with growing intimacy until his death in 1945.

C. M. Hardy, the aged but much respected secretary of the College, died suddenly while staying at Arundel House, Brighton. Some eighteen months earlier I had become Young People's Secretary at the Furnival Street headquarters of the B.M.S. I do not remember whether it was from Wheeler Robinson himself or from Grey Griffith, the B.M.S. Home Secretary to whose team I belonged, that I first heard the suggestion that I should undertake the secretaryship of the College as a "spare time" task. If I would do so, I might have, I was told, some clerical help from Miss Winifred Knight, one of the ablest of the women on the B.M.S. staff. I had been brought up to regard the College with awe. My mother's father had been at Stepney. My other grandfather had been a member of the committee. Since 1894 my father had audited the College accounts. My own years as a student had been 1922-25, and in the summer of 1933 I had been elected to the Council.

When I talked over the secretarial suggestion with "Wheeler", he assured me I should be able to do what was necessary without great difficulty. Had he any idea what was in store? Certainly I had not. A. J. D. Farrer once told me that Wheeler often failed to realise what he was asking of others, but one was always aware that he drove himself far harder than he drove others. His standards were high, but he never interfered with one to whom he had entrusted a task.

I had been to only one meeting of the College Council. To my dismay, when I secured the Minute Book, I found that the minutes had not been written up—an experience that made it my invariable rule, both as College secretary and later at the Baptist Union, to see that the drafting of minutes was in hand immediately after a meeting.

I had barely begun to find my way through Mr. Hardy's papers before we were informed that New College had decided to sell its Swiss College property and that it would be necessary to find other accommodation for the group of R.P.C. students, who had been lodging in Dr. Garvie's old house. Dr. Robinson and a number of students had been in Oxford since 1927, but there were men still in London till 1937. The sale of New College meant all kinds of unexpected responsibilities in connection with the house we secured in Parsifal Road. As long as this was used by Regent's Park men, I

went there each month to pay them the small sums allowed for out-of-pocket expenses. Later I went once a term to Oxford, meeting the men usually over a meal in the Cadena. The College had not at the time any premises in Oxford save 55 St. Giles', where Wheeler Robinson lived.

The College House and Finance Committee was a formidable body for a young man to attend and be responsible to. When, early in 1934, I first met the members in Committee Room No. 2 at Furnival Street, Herbert Marnham, treasurer of the College and treasurer of the Baptist Union, was in the chair. His companions were Francis Blight, a publisher, H. H. Collier, a surveyor, Cecil B. Rooke, solicitor, C. T. Le Quesne, barrister, and Herbert Chown, stockbroker, with Seymour J. Price, insurance broker, as rather a newcomer. Herbert Marnham insisted that the College cheque book be laid on the table and that the stubs of every cheque be examined, whether the payment had been authorised at a previous meeting or whether an emergency payment had had to be made. In either case there had to be two signatures on a cheque and it was several years before my own was authorised as one of them. To get the two signatures was often a difficult business. Frequently it involved me in visits to Mr. Rooke's offices in Lincolns Inn Fields. There he was to be found surrounded by mountains of deed boxes and bundles of papers tied with the solicitor's familiar red tape. He usually seemed anxious to chat and I knew I ought to be back at the Mission House. On one memorable grey afternoon in 1936, we went out together into Southampton Row and saw the coffin of George V being drawn down Kingsway on a gun carriage, with Edward VIII and his three brothers walking behind. It was on its way from Sandringham to Westminster Hall.

Within a few years it was clear that I should have to play a considerable part in helping Wheeler Robinson launch the financial appeal for the new building. H. H. Collier had successfully completed his delicate negotiations with St. John's College for the strip of land bordering Pusey Street. This gave R.P.C. an adequate site for a small quadrangle. I made arrangements for the House and Finance Committee to assemble in Oxford and together we visited St. Edmund Hall to get some idea of what we might hope to erect. There was irony in the fact that we used Teddy Hall as a model, for Dr. Emden later took the lead in persuading the Oxford Preservation Trust to schedule 56 St. Giles' as an ancient monument.

Another somewhat complicated task was getting the same group of laymen to Bristol to confer with Dr. Dakin, Dr. Charles Brown, H. L. Taylor and F. E. Robinson about co-operation between Regent's Park and Bristol Colleges. We were concerned about applicants for R.P.C. who were not qualified to come at once to Oxford. Dr. Dakin's name should always be honoured by Regent's men, for he, like Dr. Selbie of Mansfield College, stood firmly beside Wheeler Robinson in the substantial undertaking to which the latter had set his hand.

The drafting, circulating and printing of the appeal, and then the organisation of a series of luncheon gatherings in various centres, fully occupied any leisure my B.M.S. responsibilities allowed me between 1935 and 1938. But for Miss Knight these multiplying tasks could not have been accomplished. There were also College Summer Schools to arrange. The economic climate was unfavourable and Wheeler Robinson had to face not a few disappointments, but by 1938 we had over £14,000 in hand and the following year it had risen to over £20,000—far larger sums than they look now. The stone-laying took place in the summer of 1938. L. H. Brockington was “Wheeler’s” colleague in Oxford. He and I shared with the principal in working out all the details of that exacting but triumphant occasion. During the preceding months “Wheeler’s” letters to me came almost daily. They were characteristically laconic. He could afford to waste neither time nor energy. Some of his most important biblical and theological writing was being done in those years. One communication dealing with ordinary College affairs is worthy of record. The Oxford men had elocution lessons from Dr. C. L. Bradley, an Oxfordshire clergyman, who seemed to be constantly short of money. It was my responsibility to pay him at the end of each term. On one occasion he sent Wheeler Robinson a telegram which the latter put in an envelope and posted to me without comment. It ran: “Prithee tickle secretarial carburettor.”

Brockington was the one who with “Wheeler” watched rise on the end of what had been Mr. Dodd’s garden, the Helwys Hall, the Library and the kitchens. I was detailed to make arrangements for an opening ceremony in October 1939 and the Vice-Chancellor promised to be present. However, the outbreak of World War II caused the abandonment of any occasion of this kind. Fortunately, the previous summer, at a tense meeting of the Council, it had been decided to embark on the building of sixteen men’s rooms covering what had once been Drewitt’s Yard, a row of cottages running off St. Giles’. It was an act of faith for there was no money in hand towards the cost. “Wheeler” stood aside and would neither give a lead nor vote in favour, though most of us knew what he hoped for. By venturing we secured a complete residential unit and it was finished in the summer of 1940 just as the Government banned all private building.

It must be confessed that some mistakes were made. Wheeler Robinson was frightened of having residential staff to deal with and the rectifying of this blunder caused considerable difficulties later. But at every stage he had consulted his Oxford friends, Joseph Johnson of the Press, Sir Michael Sadler and Professor D. C. Simpson among them. By and large, however, we have every reason to be proud of buildings, which were to all intents and purposes jointly designed by Wheeler Robinson and the architect. The wrought-ironwork on the staircase to the library was an attempt by Mr. Hughes to express in that medium what he learned from the principal about William Carey.

The autumn of 1940 found me on the staff of the College and Wheeler Robinson's colleague in an even closer manner than before. This is not the place to relate all the circumstances that led to this (for me) quite unanticipated and unsought development. It came because Wheeler Robinson for once at least failed to get his initial plan accepted and because what many of the Committee desired was rejected. Both parties pressed me to go to Oxford, but the decision to do so was one of the most costly and difficult of my life.

The finding of a house in Oxford in war-time caused us great anxiety. In those days a man was expected to make his own housing arrangements and I had no capital resources. The opportunity of renting 151, Woodstock Road, came largely because the owner knew the name Angus. The house was larger than we needed and had over sixty stairs; the terms were much more than I could rightly afford. But when I consulted "Wheeler", he said I had better take the house and hope for the best. He approved my transferring my membership to the Woodstock Road church, rather than New Road, to which at the time he and Brockington belonged. But on Sunday mornings all three of us went to Mansfield College chapel and sat in the stalls with the staff, for Regent's was returning the hospitality it had had from Mansfield, and the S.C.R. was a joint one. I was told that my name ought to go at once on the Lecture List and that it was in the field of doctrine that the men most needed help. I was therefore designated Senior Tutor and Angus Lecturer in Theology.

Those first months were a considerable strain. The war situation was critical. I had several family crises to meet. I was still College secretary and the care of the library fell to me, while Brockington became Domestic Bursar. We shared the duty of sleeping in College as firewatchers during vacations. I no longer had the help of Miss Knight. Fortunately we were able after a while to secure Joyce Booth from the B.M.S.

Two additional things I was sure must be set in hand as soon as possible after my arrival in Oxford: a portrait of the principal and a gift—I hoped a *Festschrift*—to mark his seventieth birthday, then only fifteen months away. Both were somewhat delicate operations. The first required "Wheeler's" co-operation and he and I visited a number of Oxford Common Rooms to see the latest portraits. The second enterprise we managed to keep a secret from "Wheeler" until the day itself, when, led by Dr. Dakin, a small party visited him in the upstairs booklined study at No. 55, the atmosphere of which is well-suggested in James Gunn's portrait.

Wheeler Robinson's retirement took place in the summer of 1942. It was already all too obvious that he was a very tired man. Within a few months he became a sick man. He faced growing weakness and the approach of the end with great fortitude. Most Friday afternoons I cycled across Magdalen Bridge to the house he had bought, taking him the news of the week and gleaning from him information about

the past and comments on current developments and personalities. It fell to me to be one of the two with him when he died in the Acland Nursing Home the Saturday morning after the war in Europe ended.

The high expectations and the complete trust which Wheeler Robinson showed drew out more than one's latent capacities. He needed help. One was eager to render it to the limit of one's powers—and beyond. The years from 1933 to 1942, when I was his colleague, extended in effect until his death in 1945. They were exacting, for much that I did whether in London or Oxford was in addition to a normal day's work. Looking back after a quarter of a century, I know that they were among the happiest and most satisfying of my life.

ERNEST A. PAYNE.

Church Member and Deacon

MANY FRIENDS, with varying degrees of sympathy, have remarked that it must have been a formidable experience to have Henry Wheeler Robinson numbered among the members of the church at New Road, Oxford. They had memories of his official appearances, of sermon classes, his intimidating definition of a sermon as "that which uttered the personal conviction of a great truth, intelligibly expressed and applied, and imparted with the dignity of a word of God". And who is sufficient for these things?

But that formidable figure with its scholarly distinction and strong individuality had a heart of love. He was utterly convinced that the church grows out of ordinary human friendship; it must always be in some sense a family, an attempt at the highest expression of human social life. He was prepared to make allowances for much of life's ordinariness, its intruding trivialities. Before I had accepted the call to the pastorate in 1934 he had written to me pledging "hearty and loyal support." There must have been many times later when he was conscious that the pastor had failed, the hungry sheep looked up and were not fed, but he never wavered in his loyalty, never grumbled, scowled or scolded. He was a great encourager.