

MEMOIRS

Reminiscences and Encounters

I MUST confess that I felt that, as a student, I made a very poor beginning at Regent's Park College. I first applied in 1930 but Dr. Wheeler Robinson did not much care for the way in which I answered the Entrance Form. He said my answers were too brief, and in particular objected to my answer about what I believed. In that answer, and corresponding to my theological position, I had simply quoted the Pauline Benediction in Cor. 13.14. The learned Principal rightly required me to set forth my faith in my own words and he graciously sent me another entry form. Some time ago I found both my application forms in my file at R.P.C.

Along with others, of whom I specially remember Ray Smith and G. H. Woodham, I was interviewed by R.P.C. Council. During the interview one of the ministers present, at whose identity I could make a guess, asked me: "Mr. Davies, do you like preaching?" I said I did. Then came a second question: "Do the churches like your preaching?" My instantaneous, but unfortunate, reply was: "I seem to be in the same predicament as yourself, sir, I do not know". The Principal frowned upon the retort. Nevertheless I was accepted. I do not suppose for a moment that it ever crossed his mind, or the mind of anybody else there present and certainly not my own mind, that I might one day become the Principal of the College.

The third encounter was for me a serious experience. Theodore H. Robinson bade me continue at Oxford my research work begun in Cardiff. H.W.R. at my pre-terminal interview wished me to read Hebrew in the Oriental School. I declined, and we argued for more than an hour. The deadlock was complete, when he suddenly said, "Come and see me at this time next week". The week that ensued was one of the most miserable and unhappy weeks of my whole life, for I dreaded the renewal of the argument. When I went for the second interview, he began with the words: "Now about this research work, how do you propose to proceed?" I shall never forget the relief that came to me with those belated words. I have often wondered what direction my life would have taken had I followed my new Principal's advice. It is idle to speculate, but I have the feeling that if I had followed his advice, I would probably never have become Principal. A permanent tutor at Regent's perhaps, or a University lecturer, but who can tell?

At that second interview he opened my eyes to the value and necessity of the use and study of the Hebrew Concordance. He showed

me his own copy of Mandelkern, and for the next two years I constantly used the Hebrew Concordance by Fuerts, the lay-out of which I preferred. Soon I had, as I still have, my own copy of Mandelkern, of Hatch and Redpath and of Bruder. Later, in T. W. Manson's classes, I soon discovered that Hatch and Redpath was one of his Bibles too.

The use of the Concordance was one of the great lessons I learnt from H.W.R. I acknowledge my debt, and record my thanks for that lesson. Something of a fashion now exists to decry the scholarly use of the Concordance. Certainly there are difficulties, but the Concordance is primary, and the essential tool for the comparison of spiritual with spiritual, and for the scientific discovery of the spiritual riches of the Bible.

Many years later, H.W.R. wrote to me from what was his death-bed. He says that he had spent more than two and a half hours tracing down a single missing reference to *shubh*, the Hebrew root meaning 'return' and 'repentance.' This was due to the fact that he did not have his Concordance with him, and in any event it was too heavy for him to handle. So there he was with his Hebrew Bible tracking down that elusive reference. That pathetic recollection returns from time to time by way of rebuke and of encouragement.

I heard Wheeler Robinson lecture several times during my Oxford days. The lectures were moderately interesting, thorough and competent. *Gravitas* rather than inspiration I thought. But in Bristol years later, after he had retired, Dr. Dakin and I heard H.W.R. lecture on Religion to the undergraduates of Bristol University in the Great Hall of the University. The Hall was full, and I remember two things. The lecture itself was lively, witty and exciting. When it was over the students broke into a thunder of sustained applause. Dr. Dakin turned to me in astonishment and said: "This is a new Wheeler Robinson". Wheeler Robinson was a new man because the burden of R.P.C. was now on other shoulders. Dakin's remark is all the more significant when it is remembered that Dr. Dakin was very disappointed when he was not invited to follow Wheeler Robinson as Principal of Regent's Park. Dr. Wheeler Robinson himself explained the reason to Dr. Dakin. He justified the choice of R. L. Child with the observation: "He was my best student, not even excepting you, Dakin".

Some years after R. L. Child had retired, I asked him one night when he was dining in College: "Well, Mr. Child, do you look back with nostalgia or relief?" He replied: "Mainly the latter!" I shall remember those experiences and conversations in a few years, if I am spared, recalling especially how Mr. Child seemed to grow in stature, power and presence after his retirement.

I asked H.W.R. to ordain me in preference even to Thomas Phillips, for his sense and touch of ceremonial were so profound. The service made a great impression at West End, and it was talked of and remembered for a long while subsequently. Soon after he addressed

a meeting of ministers of the L.B.A. at my church in West End, Hammersmith. He spoke on "Prophetic Symbolism", and I remember a keen discussion which followed concerning the analogy between sympathetic magic and prophetic symbolism. He had to agree that the thinking behind both was similar, but maintained strongly that the moral content of prophecy guaranteed that prophetic symbolism did not take on the character of sympathetic magic.

I naturally consulted him about my appointment as O.T. tutor at Bristol Baptist College. What I remember especially was his sage observation: "If you become a tutor in one of our Colleges, you must be prepared to teach anything on the curriculum". How true that observation has turned out to be, as I recollect the variety of subjects besides the Bible which I have had to teach, not excluding English History and Literature, Church History and the Philosophy of Religion. I was elected to membership of the Society for Old Testament Study in 1935, but I did not see much of his contribution to the transactions of that Society, in which Regent's has played such a leading part. Nevertheless one memory stands out. At a certain meeting of the Society, Dr. Robinson was in the chair for one of the sessions. Sometimes a discussion would turn after a paper to questions of belief and faith, and so it happened that night. The protagonists were Father C. Lattey of the Society of Jesus, and the other no less than the redoubtable S. A. Cook of Cambridge. In that never-to-be-forgotten confrontation, it was H.W.R. who held the ring, guided the argument, initiated points of discussion and sought the reconciliation of the points of view.

I do not remember a great deal of Dr. Wheeler Robinson as a Principal. The main problem of our day was the ravages of the Oxford Group. Several of my fellow students in Oxford both in Mansfield and Regent's were obsessed with the claims and techniques of this movement. We all knew that the Principal was much concerned, but I was never involved. A man called George, from Leicester, did his utmost to win me over to the Group. I went to one of the Sunday night confessionals at the Randolph, and heard among others a woman don speak. Her testimony and attitude put me completely off, and I lost all interest in the movement thereafter.

What remains with me is the tremendous help Dr. Robinson gave me in my Oxford days with my thesis on "The Covenant", and the guidance concerning my subsequent career. My B.Litt. examiners, G. A. Cooke of Christ Church, and J. F. Stenning, Warden of Wadham, hoped that I would continue my studies at Oxford, but the Principal wanted me to study in Germany and also, strange to relate, at the Jews' College in London. Later I spent a couple of terms there, reading Mishna and Talmud. Subsequently I remember how keenly he questioned me about the value of the Talmudical literature for the New Testament and Christianity. I said I had found it disappointing, and he replied: "That is what I expected"!

I also enjoyed the weekly seminar held each term at which we studied some book of his choice. From the weekly reading, the résumés and the discussion I learnt a tremendous amount of Christian apologia. Even after I left Oxford I used to write regularly to enquire which book he had chosen for that particular term.

Outstanding in my recollection also is the memory of our regular communion services. Not that I can recall many of the themes that he took. What I do remember is the address on the mystery of Judas, together with some of his favourite and recurring quotations, and, particularly, his use of Scripture at those services.

A perusal of Dr. Robinson's books reveals his wide reading not only in theology, but in history and literature, including of course and especially poetry. We all remember the wide range and the wealth of his quotations. He must constantly have nourished his spirit with draughts from the wells of his reading, and we all know how some deliberate reading, not necessarily in our own particular field, but in some other discipline or area of study, will revive and restore our own interests. This is a technique often overlooked, and which I warmly commend.

In the conduct of the Communion itself he was sparing in the use of words. He gave place to the action — the drama of the event — the prophetic symbolism of the deeds. Even his use of Scripture was sparing but the quotations he did repeatedly use, from Psalm 116: 12-13, 1 Cor. 10: 16 and Rev. 3: 20, remain powerfully in memory and ministry. It was this combination of few words with a "concentration of spirit", to use a phrase of Lilley's, to which he directed our attention, which sums up the impact of those Communion services. H.W.R. trusted the action of the Communion to effect its own ministry. He endeavoured to let the action, the movement and the deeds of the drama speak for themselves. We lesser mortals no longer have that trust, and bury the Communion action in words, words, words. I plead especially with R.P.C. men of later generations to recall and consider this Communion ministry in which we were launched at Regent's, to go back and behind more recent tendencies to the prime simplicity of the acted parable of the meal.

The single greatest doctrinal contribution which Dr. Wheeler Robinson gave me was in his teaching concerning "The Ministry of the Holy Spirit". He really confirmed me in my Trinitarian faith. I think that I may fairly say, and I trust that it will not sound presumptuous, that I caught the Holy Spirit from him. It was from my observation of him at the Communion, my overhearing him in his prayers, my participation with him in the mood and rapture of the fellowship of worship — I saw him weep once in the Communion, — that I really entered into the experience of the Holy Spirit. From him, from his prayers, from him in the presence of God, I caught the Holy Spirit. Certainly his great book on the Holy Spirit has explained, elucidated and augmented my understanding, but it has

never been able to "convey" or impart the Spirit as he himself did, when he turned himself and us into the presence of God.

How strange that I caught again the same feeling and experience from the late Theodore M. Bamber. I recorded this in an address to the Baptist Union in 1943. These two men, poles apart in their understanding of Scripture and in their interpretation of the faith, were yet one in their testimony to the Holy Spirit. No others in our entire denomination have in my view equalled their understanding of the Spirit, or their ministry in the Spirit.

Ever since my student days Theodore Henry Robinson and Henry Wheeler Robinson have lived together in my thoughts and memory. They were of course contemporaries and in some sense rivals. Indeed at times considerable feeling existed between them, but I serve myself heir to both of them. Not many R.P.C. men may make that claim but I am glad and proud to be able to do.

On the one hand the O.T. and biblical line ran from G. P. Gould through B. Grey Griffith ("Georgie taught me Hebrew, and Theodore too"!!), T. H. Robinson, J. C. Jones, erstwhile Bishop of Bangor, A. R. Johnson, myself and others after us.

On the other hand the line ran from Buchanan Gray, H. Wheeler Robinson, L. H. Brockington, myself and others. I count myself honoured and favoured to figure in the line of descent on both sides.

There were blind spots in both these great men. Theodore H. Robinson was so catholic in his sympathies that he sometimes failed in his judgments, and did not know where to draw the line. He consequently went to extremes in his points of view which exasperated his contemporaries and tried his friends. His over emphasis on prophetic ecstasy, and on literary units in prophecy are examples of this. On the other hand Wheeler Robinson could draw the line and did. I am told that he refused to put Mowinckel's original work *Psalmstudien* into the R.P.C. library. It is still not there.

Nevertheless compared with their endowment and their contribution the faults of these men are minimal. Even their errors directed us to fuller understanding and to better and indeed, greater insights. So I am proud to acknowledge my debt to them both and my admiration too. Essentially Theodore Robinson was a Cavalier, essentially Wheeler Robinson was a Roundhead, and we can learn from both points of view.

Theodore Robinson taught me an art of presentation, and an art of prayer together with some understanding of the delicate tracery of the human spirit in relationship. Wheeler Robinson taught me an art of study and an art of communion together with some understanding of the concentration of the spirit in ceremonial, conceived as moments, words and deeds of revelation.

They were two great men, my masters both. Being dead, they still speak, and their names will live on.

G. HENTON DAVIES.