

for his text Jeremiah 20:9. "Then I said, I will not make mention of him nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones and I was very weary with forebearing and I could not stay".

The *Advertiser* of September 16th gives a short summary of the sermon. "The preacher declared that no confession of faith, no creeds were of value without personal appropriation. No one was more conscious of the faults and the limitations of his pulpit and ministry than he was but that during the last three years he had done his best. That was the utmost any man can say. He could only pray that God would use that for the best so that they might treasure up some memories in their hearts not of him or of his words but of the truths of which he had been so imperfect a channel."

Undoubtedly his short stay did much for the ultimate enrichment of the community. That Wheeler Robinson should have preached in Pitlochry Baptist Church to no effect is unthinkable and it may be that these years were part of that training and discipline which was to bring this great Baptist theologian and leader to his full maturity.

DONALD T. FORBES.

## Wheeler Robinson the Principal 1920-42

I THINK it was Mr. Neville Cardus who said that when he was on the staff of the *Manchester Guardian* and had occasion to see his chief, he would pause for a moment outside the door of his room, and brace himself, physically and mentally, for the coming interview. One did not lightly confront Mr. C. P. Scott. The same might be said with truth of Principal Wheeler Robinson. Indeed, there was not a little in common between the famous newspaper editor and the College principal. Both were men of stainless, personal integrity, to whom the claims of duty were paramount. Neither could tolerate laziness, inefficiency or deceit. And when they "scorned delights and lived laborious days", it was not because Fame was their spur, but because they were consumed by the conviction that life is a trust to be used to the full, and the promotion of truth and righteousness in the earth is at once man's highest obligation and his lasting joy. Despite great differences of belief and calling, these two men were kindred

spirits, whose dedication to their work was such as to awaken in lesser beings a sense of awe.

Henry Wheeler Robinson succeeded Dr. George Gould in the presidency of Regent's Park College in the autumn of 1920. He was then 48 years of age, with a wife and three children. The College had only recently re-occupied Holford House after the interval of the War, so that the new principal and his students began life together there at the same time. The future of the College was uncertain, since the building which had been its home since 1856 was held on a lease that was due to expire within a relatively few years, and there was little or no prospect of its renewal. Robinson had, therefore, not merely to rebuild the academic and corporate life of the college, but also to consider as a matter of urgency what was to happen when the lease of Holford House ran out.

He attacked both tasks with characteristic vigour and determination. In a sense, the former was the easier of the two, for many years spent in the pastorate and on the staff of Rawdon Baptist College had given him a first-hand experience of the kind of problems involved, and a fund of experience from which to meet them. There were two initial difficulties to be overcome. In the first place, many of the men entering college in 1919-20 came straight from some form of War Service. They were older and more mature than freshmen usually are. They had little or no experience of living together within the confines of a small residential theological college. And they represented many different types of educational ability and equipment, not to speak of theological views. The problem they presented for Robinson would have been even more complex than they were had not the College been sharing for some time past in a combined system of teaching and examinations with the two neighbouring congregational colleges of Hackney and New. This lightened the load of individual lecturers, beside giving them more scope in their classes; and Robinson took a full and welcome share in this combined operation. As a result he was able to devote special attention to the needs of his own students which he did through the opportunities afforded by corporate prayers morning and evening, personal interviews, the Sermon Class, and especially the regular weekly Communion Service which he initiated and always conducted himself. By these means, as well as by the high quality of his lectures, he came in time to acquire a moral and spiritual ascendancy over his men, which was not only a creative force of lasting importance in the lives of many of these, but also penetrated and vivified the corporate life of the House.

This process was strengthened by two innovations which Robinson made, about which I shall have something to say later. At this point I turn to the other difficulty which he had to face in the early days of his principalship, and which arose from outside the College. Widespread anxiety and controversy still existed in the 1920s concerning the new methods used by many British scholars in the study of the

Bible. Many Baptists were keenly interested in the issues involved, and some of them were concerned lest, in his adoption of these ideas, Principal Robinson might be endangering the evangelical basis of the College and the truths for which it stood. Robinson recognised the genuineness of their anxiety, and although he did not share their views, he succeeded, through friendly discussion with some of his critics, in reassuring them that their fears were groundless, and that the witness of the College to the truth of the Gospel remained unimpaired.

The question of the future home of the College raised another set of issues altogether, some of which were not new. Some years earlier, no less a person than the General Secretary of the Baptist Union (Dr. J. H. Shakespeare) had suggested that the time had come to consider establishing a Baptist College at one or other of the older Universities of Oxford or Cambridge, where the other major Free Church denominations were already represented. The idea was tentatively pursued for some time, but without any tangible results, until Wheeler Robinson galvanised it into fresh life. He knew that, quite apart from the heavy expense that would be involved, many Baptists were strongly opposed to the idea of pulling Regent's Park College up by the roots, and sacrificing the ties with London University which had been built up over so many years. An equally important question was, what was to happen to the relationship that the College had long enjoyed with the churches of the Metropolitan Area and the Home Counties? Those were indeed strong arguments against leaving London but Robinson did not regard them as decisive. The College would shortly have to move somewhere in any case; and he believed that both the College and the denomination would stand to gain by making a fresh start at either Oxford or Cambridge. The way would then be open for the denomination to give to such of its men as were able to profit by it a training for the Christian ministry under conditions that were generally acknowledged to be second to none. The debate dragged on inconclusively for some years, but came sharply to a head in 1926 when an opportunity suddenly arose of purchasing a suitable site in the very centre of Oxford. The chance was too good to be missed, and within a very few months the College was actually in token possession of its future home. The whole affair was a remarkable illustration of the doctrine of the "Persistent Purpose" which Robinson had made very familiar to his students, and which in him was rooted in a profound belief in the power of prayer.

This is not the place to tell again the story of how Robinson set to work to plan and pay for the new College at Oxford. For that readers should turn to the Rev. Robert Cooper's history, *From Stepney to St. Giles'*. But before leaving the subject, I must refer to the two methods that I mentioned above which Robinson used to commend the College's new plans to its old supporters. He realised from the start that it was one thing to remove Regent's to Oxford, but it was quite another to win the kind of support for the new policy that would

be necessary to make it viable. He also realised that the key lay very largely with the former students of the College, whose support or otherwise would be crucial. To secure this he turned in the first instance to the periodical Summer Schools. Almost as soon as he became principal, Robinson had begun the practice of setting aside every two or three years a brief period in the summer vacation when former students could gather as the guests of the College for a short residential course of study, which included also opportunities for corporate worship and fellowship. The programme was further enriched by the presence of one or more Visiting Lecturers of distinction. The idea had behind it a wide experience of the value of ministerial retreats of a general nature with which Robinson had had much to do while he was in the North. And it proved equally acceptable within the setting of the College fellowship. In the informal atmosphere of these Schools, Robinson was able to share with former students, many of whom had not previously met him at close quarters, his hopes and plans for the future, and to deal with their questions and anxieties concerning the move to Oxford. The result was to draw them together in such a way that after a few years a Fellowship of Regent's Park men was established, and in 1935 their support was pledged for the Oxford plans. Seven Summer Schools in all were held during Robinson's principalship and they continued to the end to be one of his more effective ways of maintaining contact with an ever-widening circle of former Regent's men.

A further obstacle was removed when, on the joint recommendation of Principal Robinson and Dr. Arthur Dakin, the president of Bristol Baptist College, the Councils of the two colleges agreed on a plan by which the teaching resources of both colleges could be more fully used. One of the strong features of Regent's Park policy in the past had been the willingness of its Council to receive and train suitable applicants for the Baptist ministry, no matter what their lack of earlier education or financial support might be. The move to Oxford early posed the question how this honourable tradition could be maintained in the very different conditions that obtained in Oxford. The new agreement with Bristol supplied the answer, and enabled full justice to be done to the needs of applicants of many different types, while providing for Bristol men who wished to pursue their training at a higher level the chance to do so. The result has been to produce a succession of students passing to and fro between Bristol and Oxford in the course of the years which has been of great mutual benefit to those concerned.

Regent's Park was established in Oxford in 1927, but for many years the work of the College had of necessity to be carried on also in London. And some idea of the load borne by Dr. Robinson during this transitional period may be gauged from the facts that at the same time that he was negotiating with architects and builders on the plans for the new college, and campaigning for the funds needed to build it, he was travelling twice a week between Oxford and

London, and carrying a full load of teaching and examining in both centres. He was also exercising a pastoral ministry to his own students, preaching and lecturing in the country at large, and publishing a succession of important books and articles. The programme took a heavy toll of his strength, and could not have been accomplished without the loyalty and co-operation of many whose names cannot be recorded here. But the picture would be gravely incomplete without some mention of the special contribution that Mrs. Robinson made to her husband's success. Her quiet and competent handling of the domestic affairs of the College, both at Holford House and at St. Giles' — often under conditions of great difficulty — relieved her husband of many anxieties on that score. And by her hospitality to Regent's men, old and young, Mrs. Robinson played a great part in creating and sustaining a living fellowship among them. It was largely owing to her that, from 1927 onwards, 55 St. Giles' so soon became not merely the new home of the Robinson family, but the living centre of Regent's Park College in Oxford.

There was, perhaps inevitably, another side to Robinson's indefatigable and high-powered activities. His self-discipline was such that those who did not know him well might be tempted to think of him in terms of a superbly organised and extraordinarily efficient machine. Not that he was inhuman or out of touch with common life. Baptist homes up and down the country quickly learned that there was no one easier to entertain than the principal. Yet in a very real sense he dwelt apart, and could not enter easily into the minds of lesser men. And the awe with which he came to be regarded, and to which I have already referred, was the natural man's reaction to a quality of mind and character beyond his normal grasp. Perhaps one of the reasons why his students clung so tenaciously to popular legends about their principal and his minor eccentricities was the assurance which these seemed to give to them that they and he did, after all, share and enjoy the common things of life. In fact those did most justice to Dr. Robinson who did not set him upon a pedestal, but accepted with profound admiration and gratitude his magnificent gifts, while not taking all his judgments or decisions as final.

It is a source of regret to many that Robinson's lifelong services to Baptists were not recognised by his election to the presidency of the Baptist Union. Yet it is doubtful whether he would ever have been at home in the activities of Church councils and committees. His life's work lay elsewhere, and he always regarded with suspicion anything that threatened to interfere with his chosen task. He had his reward. For, although he never saw the fulfilment of his Oxford plans, he lived long enough to see Regent's firmly integrated into the Oxford scene, and well on the way to becoming one of the leading centres of Baptist study and research in the modern world. And it was not the least of his achievements as principal that by his personal acquaintance with leading Oxford scholars, and by his respect for

Oxford standards and traditions, he won a welcome for the College that might otherwise have been very hard to achieve.

Robinson's death coincided with the emergence of a new world which presents a startling contrast to the one in which he had lived and worked. The insatiable demands today by new and rapidly growing populations for more and better opportunities of education; the almost pathological resistance of the young to every form of authority, not least that of the teaching and practice of the Christian Church, and the submergence of familiar denominational boundaries in a widening concern for the religious life of man as a whole — these were not the kind of problems with which Robinson had had to cope. And it is interesting to speculate how he would have viewed the place and functions of the Christian ministry in the modern world and the direction of advance. About this of course we can only guess. There is, however, one aspect of our situation today to which we may believe his attention would have been specially directed. For as a life long exponent of the Bible he would surely have taken with great seriousness the establishment of the State of Israel, and would have been the last to suppose that the return of the "chosen people" to Palestine could be dismissed as a purely political event. He would have been much more likely to consider this phenomenon in the light of God's unfolding purpose for the world, and to see in it an opportunity for Jews and Christians to examine together other implications of this step in the light of the great Hebrew Christian tradition of which the Bible is the source, and they themselves the divinely appointed trustees for all mankind. For the rest, no one who knew Principal Robinson can doubt that he would have met these and all other changes with serenity and courage in the secure conviction that man's way forward into fullness of light and life is still through faith in the living God, and obedience to Him who makes known His Will to those who seek it through His life-giving Holy Spirit.

R. L. CHILD.

## His Authority and Spiritual Impact

**T**HERE ARE some men who stand head and shoulders above their contemporaries and who convey an unmistakable impression of authority. Henry Wheeler Robinson was one of these. In any company he was outstanding: he could never be overlooked. This note of authority has been well caught by James Gunn in the portrait which now hangs in the Hall of Regent's Park College, Oxford. Robinson's