

IN MEMORIAM.

CHARLES DONALD ROBERTSON.

Born September 1879. Died March 1910.

NO ONE has ever loved the mountains with a more passionate yet more reasoned devotion than Donald Robertson. No one in the short century of their appreciation has brought a more subtle power of analysis and of sympathy to the understanding of their mystical inspiration. His death in their midst was the last almost welcome sacrifice in a service to which he had deliberately consecrated the brilliant powers of a brief but very perfect manhood.

On his father's side a grandson of Frederick Robertson, the great thinker and preacher, through his mother a grand-nephew of Prince Bismarck, he inherited a personality of rare combination. A wide interest in philosophy and speculative thought, an intense appreciation of literature, scholarship and artistic beauty, great natural ability for practical administration, an intuitive knowledge of every variety of human nature—these were not all; under what he would have claimed to be a Scottish power of reserve that only revealed even to his intimate friends a mind fascinating in its exquisite sympathy, in its flow of wit and seemingly inexhaustible gaiety, lay concealed a profoundly poetical even visionary temperament, Teutonic in its capacity for deep emotion, in its richness of imaginative conception. And between these contrasting elements one held the balance, securing for him, as is its unique prerogative, a sane judgment and a just appreciation of life; he possessed in an exceptional degree the great gift of humour. To this he owed his freedom at an unusually early age from the limitations of conventional thought, and his ability to express with delightful felicity both in writing and conversation original speculation often based upon profound reasoning and research. For of all things as a means of expression he loved the jest 'pressed down and running over with mingled wisdom, folly, insight and extravagance'; and he suggested more with ten words for laughter than others could enforce with a hundred of argument. By its illumination above all, by the light created for him by the clash of incongruities, of ludicrous and pathetic, real and sham, divine and human, he established the ordering of his own life—to use every gift of intellect to discover where truth lay, to use every atom of strength, mental and physical, to identify himself with the pursuit of the truth, and to invest it for himself and his friends with all the joyousness that should be its worthy setting:—

Luce intelletual piena d'amore,
Amor di vero ben pien di letizia,
Letizia che trascende ogni dolzore.

From the time he was ten years old, like the prince of fairy story, whom as the youngest of three brothers as well as 'biondo e bello



Charles Donald Robertson
Zermatt 1907

e di gentile aspetto' he much resembled, he never failed in anything he attempted and seemed exempt from all the usual ills of humanity. At Eton he was elected on the Foundation, and gained among other successes the Shakespeare medal and the final honour of the Newcastle Scholarship. He won a Major Scholarship for Classics at Trinity, Cambridge, took a First Class in Parts I. and II. of the Classical Tripos, the latter with special distinction in Philosophy, and was elected to a Fellowship. He took an active part in the social life of the University, and was an exceptionally popular member of many literary and debating societies. He became editor of the 'Cambridge Review.' He rowed in the Third Trinity first boat and in the University Trial Eights, and was made a member of the Leander Club. He cared little for the medals that reward the undergraduate of brilliance. With a modest, almost depreciatory estimate of his own ability he combined a very exact judgment of what he could achieve as well as of what was worth achieving, and he refrained from devoting serious labour to any competition that did not open to him some new sphere of knowledge. I never heard him mention a success of his own. It was the work and its material that interested him, never the reward.

It is known that a place would have been made for him on the teaching staff of his college as lecturer in Ancient History. He preferred to compete for a Clerkship in the House of Commons, a position which left him more leisure for study and for his own writing. In 1904 he was induced by his friend Theodore Llewelyn Davies, the greatest intellectual force of his generation, who lost his life shortly afterwards while bathing on the Yorkshire moors, his own favourite pastime, to accept the distinction of an appointment as Clerk in the Treasury. Of the success of his work there public mention has already been made. His sound judgment, great capacity for work, and winning but resolute personality marked him out for a career of exceptional distinction. In 1908 he was appointed Secretary to the Royal Commission on Electoral Systems. The Report of this Commission, a masterly statement of a most complex problem, he had completed before leaving for Wales this Easter. No more graceful or striking tribute has ever been paid to the personality of a young public official than was offered to his memory in the selection of his nearest personal friend as his successor to prepare the Report formally for presentation.

With a life already more than fully occupied, he yet made time for many literary and social interests. Amongst other activities he lectured at the Working Men's College, and was a most energetic Treasurer for the rebuilding fund of Bedford College. He regarded social intercourse as a duty, and worth learning to do well; and he developed a rare and unselfish gift for creating an atmosphere of gaiety and entertainment no matter how dull his company or how present his own fatigue.

His knowledge of classical and mediæval architecture and art was beyond that of the amateur. He was devoted to music, more especially to the 'mountain' composers—Bach, Beethoven,

Schumann and Brahms. His big voice, of which he could make cultivated use, had been for years looked upon as a leader in our mountain holiday choruses.

His reading was immense, but it was even more remarkable for its thoroughness. There was hardly a field of literature in which he was not at home. His taste was critical, but with the best authors in some five languages he may be said to have lived in a sense to which few can lay claim. His library contains collections of their works, specimens from almost all the famous presses, illustrative of his catholic taste as well as of his knowledge as a book collector. They are annotated throughout with scholarly references and appreciative or satirical comment. He had trained his memory to second his judgment. The language of Shakespearian tragedy, more particularly of Hamlet, almost formed a part of his usual conversation. He was at home in all the best of English and German lyric or ballad poetry. The great poets, humorists and philosophers were equally his friends. Milton he knew by heart. Goethe's 'Faust' the same. From Homer, Plato and the Greek dramatists there seemed no limit to his powers of quotation. Many of the long descents from Alpine huts are permanently associated for some of us with the sound of his voice declaiming the long roll of Greek speech or chorus, and passing inevitably, as the valley grew near, into the 'Divine Comedy.' And once with Dante there was no need of further suggestion. The mystical poetry, more especially of the 'Paradiso,' with its symbolical interpretation of Aristotelian idea, harmonised with his temperament and profoundly influenced his conception of life. The unique end of reading and of thought was always for him the research into the relationship of the human to the divine, of the 'mannikin' to the forces that controlled him. Every branch of science, 'popular' or otherwise, that could contribute to his understanding of the action of the unseen upon the mind was matter for his study. Of the Bible—and indeed of the literature of most Eastern and Western creeds—he had a scholar's knowledge, based upon textual comparison in at least three languages. Soon after leaving Cambridge he wrote a paper on the historical development of the idea of the Devil. He was engaged at his death on a translation of the 'Physics' of Aristotle. He often expressed the intention of writing a history of comparative religion. His last poem, a lyric of great power, is descriptive of the soul, harassed between the vengeance during life, taught by the early religion of the West, and the retribution after death, threatened by the religion of the East, delivering itself by its own capacity for faith.

His devotion to Dante, who gave the reality of a beautiful poetic symbolism to the researches and speculations that most occupied his thoughts, throws a very clear light for us upon the foundation of his second and far more absorbing passion, his devotion to the mountains. For him they were symbols of greater truths. His life with them was emblematic to him of the relationship between his own will and senses and the unseen forces manifest in their strength and beauty. Under the influence of their physical stimulus,

of their imaginative appeal, the current of thought ran clearer, its issue in truth seemed very near. And the poet in him repaid the debt of the philosopher by investing the mountains themselves with much of the atmosphere of reverence which belonged rather to the mystical conceptions which their glorious imagery enabled him to realise :—

Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio
Ch' esser non lascia a voi dio manifesto.

Very recently he wrote in this JOURNAL : ' High places are homes of ancient worship ; ascent is a consecrated type of labour for an exceeding great reward. . . . For some of us the most potent spell is not danger nor beauty, not fullness of life, but a simple call, a sense of craving when we are not with the mountains, of content when they stand about us. This peculiar joy and satisfaction is a proper stuff for poetry, an emotion with a mystic touch. . . . Dante's brows touched a river and it faded into the beatific vision. To each according to his gift.' And elsewhere : ' Weissshorn, Meije and Mont Blanc are mere symbols for the same emotions.'

He himself was consecrated to the mountains in a peculiar sense. His father, Charles Boyd Robertson, convinced that no greater influence could be brought to bear upon human character, took him to the Alps while still a boy and taught him something of their meaning. Donald, I think, would always have found the mountains, but the circumstances of his introduction added an early romance and mystery to the feeling with which he grew later to regard them. He became in the highest sense of the word a mountaineer. The fascination of difficult climbing, the exhilaration of great walks, came each to have its special meaning for him, but his essential happiness lay in knowing the hills to be about him, in realising the inspiration of their mere presence.

The Alps remained his ' home of worship,' although he was only able to visit them at intervals, and then only for a few weeks at a time. In 1897 he climbed the Allalinhorn, Ulrichshorn, Mittagshorn and Wasenhorn ; in 1899 the Düssistock, Scheerhorn, Oberalpstock and Windgälle ; in 1901 the Rheinwaldhorn, Piz Tumbif and Bifertenstock ; in 1903 the Gross Venediger, Rainerhorn, and a number of peaks in the Zillerthal. For some years circumstances prevented his return, but he was still constantly in the mountains, climbing in Wales or the Lakes, running on the fells, or tramping tirelessly in many countries. The river was to him yet another ' gospel-maker of the open.' Rowing, and especially canoeing, came only second to walking, and he made, amongst others, canoe descents of the Danube, Moselle, Avon, and Wye. In 1905 he was in northern Spain and indulged his passion for hill-walking in wild and sometimes solitary tramps round the edges of the Pyrenees. The customary mule he rejected. The picture of him memory most often recalls is that of the big athletic figure in khaki brown, with wind and sun in the wave of blond hair, overtopping and outpacing the rest of us following on mules, and continually disappearing ahead, with springy racing stride, over the rolling wastes of the *Despoblados*

sand-brown and bare but for their bands of dusty lavender. In 1906 he was able to revisit the Alps, and his ascents in this and the following seasons, usually compressed into two or three weeks, testify to his remarkable development as a mountaineer as well as to his indomitable energy. In 1906 he made traverses of the Aiguille du Moine by a partially new route, of the two Aiguilles du Dru from the lesser to the greater, of the Dent du Requin, ascending and descending the whole S.W. arête, of the Aiguilles de Blaitière, all three summits, of Monte Rosa from the Lysjoch, of the Rothhorn, of the Gabelhorn, and of the Zermatt Breithorn by a new route up the N. face. In 1907 he climbed the Dent du Géant, traversed Mont Blanc by the Col du Midi route in bad weather, crossed the Charmoz and the Grépon in one day, an expedition which inspired him with a profound admiration for that matchless ridge, traversed the Aiguille de l'Evêque by a new route, the Rimpfischhorn by a new route up the E. face, the Matterhorn—a notable performance, in which he and Knubel swept round from the Schwarz See Hotel up the Italian side and back to Zermatt in under twelve hours—the Rothhorn by a new route up the E. face, and the Weisshorn, including a first descent of the Schalligrat and a return down the ice-falls from the Schallijoch in the afternoon along with young Brantschen, a very fine mountaineering feat. Many of his great climbs were done alone with one guide, and a number of them on 'off' days when his companions were resting. The summer weeks of 1908 he spent with his uncle in Prussia. He was fond of riding, and the 'long rides over big expanses' compensated him for the absence of his mountains. In the winter he did some noteworthy leading on a number of the most difficult rock climbs in the Lakes.

The summer of 1909, for all its repellent weather, it is pleasant to recall was probably his happiest climbing season. It gave him the best all-round mountaineering of his experience, some memorable camping out and a variety of romantic impressions to which he often returned. As his first expedition he took part in the first ascent of the S.E. ridge of the Nesthorn. He never climbed better, and at the end of some eighteen hours of exacting climbing he led a weary comrade on a midnight descent of the glacier with an endurance and tenderness characteristic of his unselfish strength. He traversed the Finsteraarhorn, leading the greater part of the ascent by the S.E. arête; climbed the Jungfrau under trying conditions; traversed the Aiguille Verte, descending by the Moine ridge, and, from a camp above the Mer de Glace, of which for all his jesting he enjoyed every moment and himself did the most to sustain by his meteoric rushes to and from Chamonix for provisions, he took part in an attempt on the Col des Nantillons, an expedition which gave us the worst conditions and the most difficult rocks of our alpine comradeship, even as the Nesthorn had provided the finest general mountaineering. While the party rested in Chamonix he swept round for a traverse of the Aiguille d'Argentière—carried through on crampons without a step being cut—and the following day, cheerfully crossing those interminable moraines for the third time in twenty-four hours, he joined us on a



C. D. R.
(*North Wales*).

traverse of the Aiguille du Chardonnet, our last and perhaps our most cloudless climb together. On the descent he sat for a time on the Col du Passon, bidding farewell to the vista up the glacier d'Argentière, 'perhaps the most glorious view in the Alps,' with one of the long spells of silence that marked the presence of deep emotion.

'The proper attitude of the soul in the Alps is one of silence.' When climbing he was completely absorbed, and even in camp or hut with the spell of the mountains still about him he spoke little. The poet was in the ascendant and a sudden word or smile said all that was needed. The quick anticipatory flash of his eyes gave always a further meaning to his silence, just as it revealed an unflinching intimacy of understanding behind his most fantastic flights of nonsense. Once when we had failed to meet upon a glacier, owing to his invention of an express route up an ill-reputed icefall, an Italian priest who reunited us described him as 'clearly an Englishman by his size and silence, but with a smile stolen from Leonardo.' His intuitive sympathy with his surroundings amounted to genius. The mountains asked for no more than they gave, but in the intercourse of ordinary life he had a power of self-subordination for which no description is adequate but 'spiritual unselfishness.' At the same time the dominant note in the ordering of his own life was pride, the pride of the knight of chivalry. He was too proud ever to speak a rough word or a bitter judgment. Like Dante he knew, with strange insight, all the circles of evil in the human heart, but on his own thought or speech the knowledge had no more hold than a dried leaf upon white fire. His harshest censure took the form of a debonair mockery, all his own. Knight-like he left nothing incomplete. After a delightful little speech which he made recently to the Climbers' Club, it was noticeable that the applause was varied by many shouts of 'well done.' It was the first thought suggested by almost everything he said or did. In every detail, and as a whole, his life was exquisitely finished. He had the knightly pride in the perfecting of the action or thought and the knightly unconsciousness of any personal credit in its achievement.

And it was to this chivalrous and idealistic strain in him that climbing made its magical appeal. The region of mountains already held him, poet, artist, and philosopher, as the single domain of beauty and self-discovery, but mountaineering itself captured him as knight adventurer. 'The zest of measuring strength against difficulty, the spell of risk and responsibility, the glory of the summit, the discipline of failure, the whole vividness and fullness of life which make memorable our days among the rocks and snow,' these were to him what the joy of the quest and the battle was to Sir Galahad, the test of manhood, the only opportunity offered in these years for realising strength and heart and brain in a conflict with the great natural forces. His imaginative conception of the mountains found in this way its complement in his idealisation of climbing. In the intervals of strenuous work he threw himself into it with the inspired purpose, the boyish enthusiasm of the mediæval knight,

who strove to wrest from the reality of perilous achievement the mystical vision of truth. He hated of all things 'taking cover'; and with open eyes he set himself against ever increasing degrees of difficulty. For in this progressive achievement alone could he feel that his inheritance of strength and intellect found their justification. And it was this that made his death possible. The impatient courage of an imaginative nature may fail at times to remember in the joyous moment of release that untrained sinew and nerve cannot at once respond to the immediate desire of the heart for the full stress of the contest. More than most men he had weighed the chances of death. He was prepared to welcome its coming, if it came, not so much with the soldier's acceptance of ill chance as with the triumphant assurance of the Greek that death was but a crowning incident, proving of itself that manhood had for once been tested to the utmost and had not yielded. For all the protection that hedges our civilised life death is still ever most active in the ranks of the high-hearted, the greatly imaginative,—

*Αἰεὶ δ' ἄμφ' ἀρεταῖσι πόνος δαπάνη τε μάρναται πρὸς ἔργον
κινδύνῳ κεκαλυμμένον.*

And it is they whose leadership in fair deeds most exposes them to hidden peril who can least be spared. Since the very aloofness and mystery of our great pursuit attract to it a more searching and educated criticism for its 'waste of valuable lives' than will consent to concern itself with the far more numerous but more vulgar accidents of inevitable chance, it is right that Donald's own view should be known and that it should be given full weight as the deliberate judgment of a great mountaineer and a great mind. In March 1908 he wrote to the late Sir Henry Bergne, on the occasion of his own election to the Alpine Club and not long after the death of his friend Francis Bergne: 'You have made me formally a member of the brotherhood from which your son was taken. I shall not be afraid or ashamed if I am called upon to give up my life to my devotion as he did his.' On the rare occasions on which he spoke of himself, even in the intimacy of some starlit camp above river or glacier, it was clear that the thought of death was constantly with him, without sentiment or affectation, as an incident of supreme interest, but no more than an incident, in the ennobling relationship of the mountains to human emotions greater than either life or death. In March of this year he ended the only paper he ever read to our Club with a message, which the circumstances of its delivery and the dignity of its thought and expression must make memorable while mountaineers have hearts to thrill. It is an assurance that, at a time when life was opening with peculiarly happy prospects, there seemed to him nothing incomplete, nothing disproportionate, nothing but a note of final harmony in the joyous surrender to the hills, the symbols of his inspiration, of the youth and strength and genius which only in that inspiration had for him been realised and perfected.

It is known that the Paper, which precedes, gave him especial pleasure to write. He had long felt that there were certain things that ought to be said about our modern attitude towards mountaineering; and he was glad to have been able to make, however hurriedly, some protest against our conventional absurdities of description, some appeal for a more worthy treatment of our 'ancient worship.' It is characteristic of himself; a play of 'poetry, puns, and metaphysics' interpreting a sequence of original thought wider in its application than to mountaineering alone, and expressed with a literary grace that is charged with a deeper note of poetry whenever thought has recalled to him the vision of the majesty of the hills, of 'the great sleeping ones who have but to stir in their slumber and he sleeps with them.'

G. W. Y.

ACCIDENTS IN 1910.

THE ACCIDENT ON GLYDYR FACH.

ON March 24 Donald Robertson travelled up with J. P. Farrar and M. Beresford Heywood to join a large party of friends at Gorphwysfa Hotel on the Llanberis Pass. Owing to a breakdown in the train service they did not arrive until after 1 A.M. On Good Friday morning he accepted a place in Shadbolt's car, forming one of a party of five, with Leslie Shadbolt, Geoffrey Bartrum, Heywood, and Frank Don, who purposed making the ascent of the difficult Eastern gully of Glydyr Fach. The rest of us followed more slowly in carriages, bound for less exacting climbs on the neighbouring peak of Tryfan.

They left the car at Ogwen Cottage and ascended the lower slopes very rapidly to the foot of the gully. Robertson raced ahead in high spirits, talking happily of his previous climbs on this great amphitheatre of mountains, and particularly rejoicing in their beautiful appearance in the morning sun.

None of the five had previously visited the gully, but they had obtained some general information as to its situation from two younger members of our party who had climbed it two days before.

On reaching the foot of the first great pitch, a wall flanked by a crack, some 100 feet in height but broken into two sections, which forms the principal difficulty on the climb, the others sat down to rest, but Robertson, seemingly in great heart and anxious to begin, spent the time in exploring a possible line up the containing buttress. When the others were ready (at about 11.30 A.M.) he returned, and from the first made it clear that he wished to be on the leading rope and himself to lead the ascent. To this there could be no demur. The climb was one well within his normal powers. His mountaineering experience was greater than that of his four friends, all first-class climbers, and those who have climbed with him know well that among his beloved hills he accepted his own full