



PETER HUME BROWN

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In Memoriam

PETER HUME BROWN

THE life of a scholar is in his writings, not in its external incidents; it is through his books that he exercises his influence, it is through them that his memory is kept alive outside the circle of his friends. Professor Hume Brown was born at Haddington on December 17, 1850, and graduated at Edinburgh in 1878; he was designed for the Church, but abandoned the intention of entering it, and, after a few years' schoolmastering and private teaching, resolved to devote himself to literature. He found it a hard struggle, but adhered to his purpose, and published in 1890 his *Life of George Buchanan*. The biography at once attracted attention, for the subject involved both exact research and wide reading, and it showed by its solid workmanship and discriminating criticism evidence of maturity of judgment and sound scholarship. There was something significant in the choice of Buchanan as the subject of his first book. 'In his own country,' wrote Hume Brown, 'his great name and the inspiration of his example have been amongst the strongest influences in maintaining the tradition of the higher studies. For such studies Scotland has always had the most meagre provision, yet in every generation since Buchanan's day there never has failed a line of students with the highest ideals in learning and national education, and it is to Buchanan, more than to any other, that this tradition is due.'

In another way, too, the example of Buchanan may have influenced Hume Brown. Buchanan, he tells us, 'might have found in the Church some comfortable benefice that would have enabled him to cultivate his muse in peace. That the temptation came to him we have some reason to believe. But he was too deeply moved by the new ideals of the time in religion, in literature, in politics, to make the compromise without injury to his best self. Accordingly, as we believe, he made what for a man of his type is

the highest sacrifice he possibly can make. He sacrificed the life that would have yielded him the best opportunity of cultivating his special talent.'

The biography of Buchanan was followed in 1895 by a *Life of John Knox*. Both were representative men, but while the first represented the intellectual movement of the beginning of the sixteenth century, the second represented the religious revolution which succeeded it. Hume Brown elucidated from fresh evidence the political activities of Knox, and settled by documentary proof the vexed question of his portrait. His estimate of Knox as a man was in all essentials the view which Scottish tradition has handed down. In a remarkable passage at the end of the book he insisted on the value of such national traditions—'the deposited impression of collective bodies of men,' he terms them—as a guide to the historian in forming his conception of historical characters. As to the doctrinal system of Knox, Hume Brown was too deeply imbued with the modern spirit to accept it without large reservations. He treated it philosophically, as the manifestation of the religious needs and ideals of the time. The adoption by Scotland of some form of Protestantism was, under existing conditions, inevitable: the particular form Protestantism took in Scotland was determined by the character of the nation, which the Presbyterian Church in its turn reshaped and moulded.

After writing these two lives, Hume Brown abandoned historical biography. 'The history of no individual, however great or fascinating, is to be weighed against the interest that belongs to a people evolving the fate conditioned by its own natural forces and the changing circumstances in which these forces must be exercised.' In other words, he found the life of a nation more interesting than the life of a man. Accordingly, in 1899, he published the first volume of the *History of Scotland*, which he completed ten years later. 'Remarkably compendious and lucid,' said one of the critics of the first volume; others complained that he omitted the romantic, and seemed sedulously to avoid the picturesque. But the moderation and sanity of his judgment, his breadth of view, and his learning, were too conspicuous to be disregarded, and when the last volume had appeared it was recognised as the best history of Scotland in existence. One merit was its completeness. Tytler ended in 1603, Burton and Lang stopped with the '45, Hume Brown carried the story of the Scottish people down to the Disruption, and in a later edition down to 1910. Another merit was that he gave a clear and consecutive narrative

of events, bringing out their significance, but not crowding his pages with superfluous details or controversial digressions about doubtful points. He was critical in his use of evidence. 'I have confined myself to what seems to be indisputable fact'—'Between the conflicting authorities it is impossible to fix with certainty the exact sequence of events'—'A detailed account of the battle would consist only of balancing authorities; and these authorities themselves are both brief and obscure, and, in general, entitled to no implicit faith.' This caution gained him the confidence of other historians, who knew of what flimsy materials smooth accounts of historical events are often constructed.

However, the history was constructive as well as critical. By adducing fresh evidence, or by incorporating the results of recent researches by other scholars, Hume Brown made the story of Scotland more accurate, and filled up a certain number of gaps in it. At the same time he brought out with more clearness and fulness the various factors which retarded or furthered the political development of Scotland, such as the physical condition of the country itself at various times, the progress of trade and agriculture, and the social changes. In the two volumes entitled *Early Travellers in Scotland* and *Scotland before 1700, from Contemporary Documents*, published respectively in 1891 and 1893, he had collected a mass of evidence illustrating these problems, and his editorship of the *Register of the Privy Council* familiarised him with another mass of evidence bearing on the same side of his subject. In the Rhind Lectures on *Scotland in the time of Queen Mary*, published in 1904, he showed how these and other sources of information could be systematically combined so as to produce a true and vivid picture of the life of the nation at any particular stage.

Another feature of the *History of Scotland* is the systematic employment of literature to explain the intellectual life of the nation and the ideas which influenced its development. In one of his lectures Hume Brown shows the nature of the assistance which literature affords the historian. Contemporary chroniclers are often preoccupied with petty details and incapable of philosophical or spiritual insight. They do not see the true proportions of the events they record. The writer of history in a later age 'sees past ages through a double veil—the veil of his own personality and that of the age to which he himself belongs.' He can only escape from 'this double illusion' by familiarising himself with the

literature of the generation whose actions he is relating.¹ In the literature of any period 'we have the veritable expression of its spirit, disfigured by no distorting medium.' Furthermore, 'the deepest springs of natural life' are only to be discovered through the study of its literature.

'What were the conceptions of man's relations to his fellows, to life itself, to the general scheme of things, which dominated the mind of the nation at the different periods of its history? It is only with these conceptions in our minds that we can adequately interpret the outward and visible signs of a nation's life at any given period. Behind the social order, behind the forms of government, which meet our eye, these conceptions are the impelling and directing forces that brought them to birth. They inspire and regulate the policies of statesmen; they make what is called public opinion, and they determine the ideas to be found in all art and literature.'

Selecting four literary monuments as representative documents, Hume Brown shows how they reveal the varying ideals of individual and collective life which inspired successive generations of Scots.² The lectures quoted form part of a series of addresses delivered to the class of Scottish History at the opening of successive sessions. Taken together they make up a commentary on Hume Brown's *History*; they emphasise the principles which underlay his accounts of the facts, state them disentangled from details and made plain by examples, show his conception of the problems to be solved and his method of arriving at their solution. They give us, in short, his philosophy of Scottish history. In one he explains the process by which the various races and classes of Scotland were consolidated and amalgamated into a nation.³ In a second he vindicates the Scottish nobility from the sweeping condemnation often pronounced upon them, proving that their action was not so purely selfish and its results not so maleficent as is generally supposed.⁴ In a third he discusses the Union of England and Scotland.⁵ The Union was

¹ 'Literature and History,' *Scottish Historical Review*, vi. 9.

² 'Four Representative Documents of Scottish History,' *Scottish Historical Review*, x. 347.

³ 'The Moulding of the Scottish Nation,' *Scottish Historical Review*, i. 245.

⁴ 'The Scottish Nobility and their part in the National History,' *Ib.* iii. 157.

⁵ 'Scotland in the Eighteenth Century,' *Ib.* vi. 343; 'Intellectual Influences of Scotland on the Continent,' *Ib.* xi. 121.

also the subject he selected for the six lectures he gave in Oxford in 1912, as Ford Lecturer. He held that the Revolution put an end to the conflicts about religion which began at the Reformation, by effecting a working compromise between Church and State, and that henceforth secular interests were predominant. The Union completed the change by making material progress possible, and in the end producing material prosperity. The two together 'opened the way to a larger life,' and made possible the intellectual development which gave Scottish literature and Scottish thought European fame and influence. Hume Brown quotes Masson, who declares that the latter half of the eighteenth century was for Scotland 'the period of her most energetic, peculiar, and most various life.' He goes even further, and terms it 'the most distinguished period of her annals,' because of 'her contribution to the world's thought' during those years. Here and elsewhere his strong national feeling and his pride in the achievements of Scots is combined with a resolution to estimate men, facts, and ideas from a European as well as a local standpoint.

Hume Brown was the pupil of Masson, to whose teaching he always expressed great obligations. He succeeded Masson as editor of the *Privy Council Register* in 1898, and completed during his editorship fifteen volumes of the digest, covering the period from 1627 to 1684. He was also chosen to succeed Masson in the office of Historiographer Royal of Scotland in 1908, which was a fitting recognition of the value of his work, and pleased him because of its antiquity, and because his patent bore the great seal of Scotland. In 1901 he was elected to the Fraser Chair of Ancient History and Palaeography, of which he was the first holder. In his palaeography class and by his lectures on Scottish history, he inspired a few students with his own enthusiasm for his subject, and equipped them for historical investigations. Some have since done credit to his teaching by their writings, and more will in due season. As the adviser of the Carnegie Trust in questions of historical and literary research, he was able to secure for his best pupils opportunities to continue their training and to produce their work, and to help in the same way students trained in other universities. No one was more eager to encourage young students, none a better judge of their merits.

While he did much for the higher branches of learning, he was equally zealous for popular education. In an address delivered in 1908 he discussed the teaching of history in schools. 'Know-

ledge of our own national history must be the basis,' said he ; to be supplemented by teaching the history of England and the British empire afterwards. Not for patriotic reasons chiefly, but because a child could understand and assimilate the history of his own country as he could that of no other country, and by developing his intelligence and imagination, it would qualify him to understand the history of any other country. At the time the chief obstacle to the teaching of Scottish history in schools was the lack of a good text-book. The publication of his *Short History of Scotland*, in 1909, supplied this want : it has since attained a circulation of many thousand copies.

Hume Brown was essentially a man of letters as well as an historian, and literary topics filled a large place in his conversation. Two of his favourite authors were Montaigne and Sainte Beuve : the speculative freedom of the one, and the delicate critical insight of the other attracted him, and his way of thinking was influenced by both. Perhaps the greater ease and freedom which marks the style of Hume Brown's later writings compared with the earlier ones, was in part due to constantly reading great French writers. With German literature of the best time he was also familiar. A mask of Goethe, which he inherited from Carlyle through Masson, stood for the last ten years over his bookcase, and for twenty years a life of Goethe occupied his leisure moments. The first instalment of it was published in 1913 ; the rest lies in manuscript, ready for printing. Its completion was a source of great satisfaction to Hume Brown, for he feared he might not be able to finish it. Not that he was conscious of any weakening of his faculties, but his strength was diminishing, and he felt that time was a dangerous antagonist. A few weeks before his death he wrote to me, saying that he wished to read an unfinished book of my own, and hoping that it would be published before long, because 'the night cometh.' What I took for a warning was a premonition. He died suddenly, after a very short illness, on November 30.

Hume Brown was a man of very equally balanced mind and character, in whom, like Horatio, the blood and judgment were well commingled. His temper was remarkably even and cheerful. His feelings and enthusiasms were strong, but he was restrained in his expression of them by habitual self-control and a natural sense of measure. What he believed he adhered to tenaciously, and was as constant to his ideals as to his friendships ; but he was open to new ideas, and received new acquaintances with an attrac-

tive kindness. Sensitive himself, he had in matters of feeling the gift of understanding instinctively without many words, a delicate consideration for others, and great tact in conveying his sympathy. His conversation had a peculiar charm, it was an honest exchange of ideas over a wide range of subjects ; he never talked for effect or seemed to seek an argumentative victory ; the opinions he expressed were the result of independent thought and long observation ; his large knowledge had served to form them, it was not an appendage to his mind, but something he had absorbed and assimilated so that it was a part of himself. As he talked on his quiet eyes glowed, his face lighted up, and he allowed his humour and his imagination to find free play.

C. H. FIRTH.

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¹ Jointly with Professor Masson.

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