

“CLAUDIUS CLEAR”

THE Disruption of the Kirk in 1843 was even more successful than its leaders had dared to hope for. There was no parish that did not yield at least the nucleus of a Free Church congregation. In some parishes ministers and congregations seceded, in many ministers were left without congregations or congregations without ministers. There were even presbyteries that seceded *en bloc*. The only considerable black spot from the Free Church point of view was Aberdeenshire, which had long been notorious for its “moderatism” and where even the evangelicals shrank from pushing their principles to the point of secession. Thus in the little Donside presbytery of Alford few of the people “came out” and none of the ministers. Disruption policy, however, required that a Free Church presbytery of Alford should be set up without delay and that the little handful of the faithful in each parish should have the status of a full pastoral charge. To make up the complement of ministers, two schoolmasters were ordained—Dr. Pirie Smith, who became minister

of Keig, and the Rev. Harry Nicoll, who was settled in his native village of Lumsden as minister of Auchindoir. Both of these ex-dominies married into the Clan Robertson,¹ and the eldest son in each case was christened William Robertson. The parallel goes no further. The two worthy men were as unlike in character as their distinguished sons after them proved to be.

The Nicoll family history is interesting as illustrating the capriciousness of Scottish sectarian divisions. The erratic path of the line that separates Presbyterian from Presbyterian is notorious; it is not so well understood that at one time there was the same uncertainty about the dividing line between Presbyterian and Episcopalian. The Nicolls were pure-bred Highlanders. Harry Nicoll's great-grandfather had been "out" in the 'Forty-five and had fought at Culloden. Naturally the old rebel was an Episcopalian, and one at least of his grandsons, a wheelwright who plied his trade at the village of Monymusk, carried on the Episcopalian tradition of the family. This wheelwright had a clever son, Alexander Nicoll (1793-1828), who went from Aberdeen University to Balliol as a Snell exhibitioner, took orders in the Church of England, and at the age of twenty-nine became Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford and a canon of Christ Church.

¹ Robertson blood seems to make for intellectual ability. Gladstone and Rainy both came of the Robertsons of Kindeace. Mrs. Nicoll was one of the Robertsons of Struan, the branch to which Robertson of Brighton belonged.

But Harry Nicoll's father, a younger brother of the wheelwright, who was a small farmer at Lumsden, deserted the old faith and conformed to the Kirk. Harry was brought up in the Moderate school of Presbyterianism, but somehow—the circumstances are unknown—came to profess Evangelical opinions while a student at Aberdeen. He became parish schoolmaster at Auchindoir and a licentiate of the Kirk. At the Disruption he resigned his schoolmastership and threw in his lot with the Free Church. It is no reflection on his sincerity to suggest that his decision was influenced by his ambition to exchange his desk for a pulpit, which he had no prospect of realising if he remained in the Establishment.

A Scottish country parson has fewer opportunities for cultivating eccentricity than his English brother. His ecclesiastical discipline sees to that. But within the permitted limits old Harry Nicoll was certainly a queer fish. He was taciturn and passionless—strange qualities in a Highlander. Twice each Sunday he would edify his flock with austere expositions of orthodox evangelical doctrine. He had a formidable theory of preaching which put a strict ban on anecdotes, poetical quotations, the first personal pronoun, perorations and everything that savoured of an emotional appeal. He was at great pains to make his sermons conform to his ideal. Out of the pulpit he never spoke of religion even to his

own family, though he might express an academic opinion on a theological question. But generally he seems to have regarded talking of any kind as a waste of precious time that ought to be devoted to reading. For Harry Nicoll loved books with a passion that in the case of a less respectable object would have been regarded as wicked, or even insane. In order to gratify it he starved himself. That was a small matter, for he was a man of tough constitution. The wicked thing was that he also starved his young wife and family. Poor Mrs. Nicoll! Her husband's wedding gift to her had been an Italian edition of Ariosto. When after a few years of bookish married life she lay on her death-bed, he was unremitting in his solicitude for her comfort and read Madame Guyon to her for hours every day. When she died he bowed quietly to the will of Heaven and consoled himself by buying more books than ever. At his death in 1891, in his eightieth year, his library consisted of 17,000 volumes, for which his wife and three of the five children she bore him had paid with their lives, and his two surviving children had contributed their share in broken health.

An idyllic presentment of the old bookworm has been given by his son in *My Father*, which is perhaps the cleverest thing Robertson Nicoll ever wrote. It was produced as a counterblast to Mr. Gosse's *Father and Son*, and journalistic acumen combined happily with filial piety to

falsify the record. It is quite true that the old manse at Lumsden was free from the nightmare fanaticism that brooded over the Gosse household. No bookworm was ever a bigot, and Mr. Nicoll's strict evangelical orthodoxy seems to have coexisted with a deep-seated scepticism. His children had to perform their proper Sunday tasks, but of direct religious instruction from their father they had none. The conventional rule that only religious books were permissible on Sunday was liberally interpreted so as to include Renan, Strauss, Colenso and other respectable rationalists, whom the old gentleman did by no means abhor. No book in the wonderful library was forbidden to the children, and equally no book was ever prescribed for reading except *The Arabian Nights*, *Don Quixote* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which Mr. Nicoll highly esteemed as providing the infant mind with the best basis for its literary education.

All this was very well, but little children cannot be nourished and made happy on books and broadmindedness. Mrs. Nicoll left four living, the eldest only seven years old. Looking back on the life at the manse Robertson Nicoll, when he was not writing for publication, confessed that their father's devouring selfishness made their childhood thoroughly miserable. They were by inheritance delicate children. They were not properly fed. The only care they received was from the overburdened hands

of an old Highland servant of all work, whose kitchen was their only refuge in the long winter evenings. For though the manse was small—not much more than a superior cottage—three apartments in addition to the study were appropriated by the monstrous, cancerous growth of printed matter that covered every wall from floor to ceiling, and filled great double bookcases through the middle of each room. And, though not at all harsh, Mr. Nicoll was the reverse of an amiable man. His reticence was chilling, and when engaged on his interminable studies he was extremely irritable and sensitive to noise. The children’s play must ever be hushed lest their father be disturbed in the all-important task of converting himself into a walking encyclopædia that nobody would ever consult. As they grew older the children developed a natural sense of grievance. There was no actual rebellion, only a bitter resentment at the old man’s callous egoism which they carried with them all their days. “I always feel”, said Robertson Nicoll when a man of fifty, “that I was defrauded of my youth—there was so little sunshine in it—far too little.”

But William Robertson Nicoll was his father’s son. Nobody who has been brought up among books, however much he may have had to suffer for the privilege, can ever be anything but bookish. William acquired from his father the art of reading, enormously, rapidly and retentively,

and, like his father, he always felt, as Sir James Barrie has put it, that the next best thing to a good book is a bad book. Where he differed from his father and raised the flag of rebellion was that at an early age he made up his mind that the first object in reading a good book and the only object in reading a bad one is to convert them both into hard cash. After a preparatory year at Aberdeen Grammar School he matriculated at Aberdeen University at the tender age of fifteen, and led the meagre life of the Scottish student of the old days. A bursary of £11 a year paid his fees, and 10s. a week found him in bed and board. He bore his poverty stoically, but it is to his credit that he never pretended that he liked it or got any benefit from it. He was not a distinguished student. Although he had a poor purse and a weak chest, the sentimental rôle of the "lad o' pairts" did not appeal to him in the least. He worked no more at classics, mathematics and philosophy than on a close calculation was strictly necessary for his degree. But he was not idle. It was remarked with disapproval that he spent hours every day in the Corn Exchange Reading Room, perusing with care the current numbers of newspapers and reviews, and making exhaustive researches into the bound volumes. There was nothing random about these studies. The lad wanted money, and his only means of getting it was his pen.

Being an Aberdonian and a realist he had no high notions about literature as a livelihood, and none of that innocent conceit of most young men with literary ambitions, who, like George Primrose, think they have nothing to do but sit down and “dress up three paradoxes with some ingenuity”. With a hard sagacity far beyond his years he saw clearly (how few of us do!) that periodical literature is a commodity like soap or cotton piece-goods, and that if you don’t know the market you are not likely to sell much. Market conditions, as he summed them up from his study of the press, were these. There was no demand whatsoever for anything that with propriety could be described as thought. (This was a great comfort, for thinking takes time, and in journalism more than in anything else time is money.) On the other hand, there was a very substantial demand for palatable and predigested information. Willie Nicoll, though only in his teens, was confident that he could deliver the goods, and he judged rightly. For, strange to say, old Harry Nicoll, who always took six months to review a book for the *Aberdeen Journal*, had taught his son not only how to read but how to write. “My father was a connoisseur in style, and used to talk much on the subject. He disliked high-flown writing such as that of Christopher North. . . . What he asked for in a writer was clearness, limpidity, short sentences. His favourite stylists were Hazlitt and Newman.”

Willie pondered these things in his heart. He invariably wrote short sentences that always seemed to be clear and limpid, even when they were not. The consequence was that when, at the age of nineteen, he entered upon his theological course at the Aberdeen Free Church College, he was already an experienced and successful journalist. It is true that his work was of a humble sort. The local press and one or two popular miscellanies of fact and fiction published from Dundee made up his market. The pay was poor, very poor, but our Willie's motto was small profits and quick returns. When he sat down in his humble lodging to write an article or a "poem"—for, alas! he could rhyme—he always did so with the assurance that he would sell it. In the days of his greatness he could boast that since he first put pen to paper he had never had but one article and one poem rejected. During his four years at the theological college his *clientèle* increased. He joined the regular staff of the *Aberdeen Journal*, to which he contributed, among other matter, a weekly column on things in general over the appropriate signature of "Quid Nunc". He wrote for the *Scotsman*, the *Literary World*, *Once a Week* and *Chamber's Journal*, which was then under the editorship of James Payn. (Nicoll always retained a strong regard for Payn, and wrote a very approving "Claudius Clear" letter about him when he died.) In addition, he found time to

lecture on English literature at a young ladies' academy, and was always willing to act as private tutor to anybody who would pay him a shilling an hour. In this way he did more than support himself. When he passed out of the college in the spring of 1874 he had £200 in the bank. Unlike most “probationers” he had not long to wait for a church. Within a few weeks he had received calls from Dufftown and Rhynie. He elected for Dufftown and was ordained in the following November, being then twenty-three years of age. Barely three years later he was translated to Kelso, one of the most desirable Free Church charges in the south of Scotland.

Nicoll's rapid initial success in the Church was due to the same sagacity that had already enabled him to win many a guinea by his pen and was later to make him a commanding figure in British journalism. He could always crowd the pews just as he could always sell an article. To him the preacher's problem and the journalist's were substantially the same—to find a market and develop it. This, he noted, was not to be done by cheap-jack displays of pulpiteering. Picking up business off the street is not marketing. Robertson Nicoll had nothing but contempt for “popular” preachers. His methods were subtler. He started with the advantage of having a multitude of interests and no enthusiasms—not even the enthusiasm of youth. Unlike most of his fellow-students he was perfectly

immune from the effects of the new theological wine that Robertson Smith had brought from Germany. He drank it all in with a just appreciation of its flavour, but it did not fire his blood. For Robertson Smith personally he never seems to have had much liking, and was one of the few young ministers who voted for his deprivation. Smith never forgave him. They had known each other from childhood, and Smith felt that "auld lang syne" at least should have ensured him Nicoll's support. But—dating back it may be to those very days of childhood—there was on the part of Nicoll some secret antipathy which all his life rendered him unable to refer to Robertson Smith without a hint of depreciation. It would be a mistake to stress the personal equation, for in any case the things Robertson Smith stood for never counted high in the Nicoll scale of values. He had a marvellous eye for appraising a religious creed and its quality as a going human concern. In this respect he found liberal theology wanting. It might invoke the sacred name of Truth, but what is Truth? And in any case, what is there to show that people are interested in it? He had no prejudice against liberal theology, neither had he any illusions about it. It did not in his judgment contain the elements that make for really successful preaching, whereas orthodoxy did.

Now beware of misjudging him. His was not the cynical choice of the thing that pays. There

was never anything of the cynic about Robertson Nicoll. Fond of money as he was—and not even his most devoted friends would deny him that weakness—he would never preach or write anything that he did not after a fashion believe. One rather hesitates to describe him as a religious man, for that suggests too much; but he knew what religion was, and he certainly had a theology—a version of Puritan mysticism about which he was capable of writing cantankerous letters to any clerical friend who said he could not understand it. Hence his curious partiality for small, old and narrow Puritan sects, which first manifested itself in his earlier student days at Aberdeen. The good woman with whom he lodged belonged to the Original Secession body,¹ and with her he worshipped rather than with his own denomination. The habit persisted even in the sophisticated “Claudius Clear”, whose favourite Sunday recreation was attendance at Particular Baptist chapels. If his attitude towards old-world orthodoxy was not exactly faith, it was at least one of genuine æsthetic appreciation which did almost as well; and the eye of the connoisseur is not the less loving for being sensible of market values. The moment at which he passed out of the college was opportune for displaying his practical insight. In 1874 Scotland was in the throes of the Moody and Sankey revival. It does not appear that Nicoll was much impressed by Moody’s preach-

¹ This remnant of the “Auld Licht Anti-Burghers” still exists.

ing, and certainly Moody's theology was not of a kind to appeal to him. But there was the broad fact of the religious quickening which no preacher who knew his business could think of ignoring. The question was how best to recognise it. Ordinary men answered it by ineffective imitations of Moody. Not so Nicoll. He had noted that by far the most consistently effective exponent of evangelical orthodoxy of the day was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and accordingly, on taking up his first pastoral employment as *locum tenens* in a country parish, he made an intensive study of Spurgeon's sermons. The gratifying result was that within two or three months congregations were competing to secure his services. The soundness of his method was proved by the unbroken success of the eleven years of his ministry.

Nicoll's clerical life was closed abruptly by the break-down of his health in 1885, when he began to show signs of the malady that had already carried off his mother, his sister and his brother.¹ He resigned his charge at Kelso and went to live at Dawlish. There he began to mend, but the medical verdict was that he must never on any account resume preaching. Thenceforward his energies must be content with the pen for an outlet. To another man this would have been a sad blow, but in Nicoll's case it was

¹ Henry Nicoll, editor of the *Aberdeen Evening Gazette*, died at his brother's manse at Kelso, January 29, 1885, aged twenty-seven.

merely the anticipation of a decision that would have been forced upon him sooner or later. For during the years of his pastorate the activity and scope of his pen had steadily increased. Shortly after settling at Kelso he became reader to an Edinburgh firm of publishers, Messrs. Macniven and Wallace, for whom he projected and edited a very successful series entitled the *Household Library of Exposition*. He also persuaded Messrs. Sonnenschein to start under his editorship a homiletic monthly called the *Contemporary Pulpit*. He wrote several books, including a *Life of Christ*, which was and still is a best seller of its kind, and a really meritorious life of Tennyson. During one of his visits to Edinburgh he met Mr. Hodder of Hodder and Stoughton, and lost no time in propounding a scheme for a series to be entitled the *Clerical Library*. It was a good scheme. Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton adopted it and Nicoll carried it through. Next Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton made him editor of *The Expositor*, which he continued to conduct as a beloved paragon for the rest of his life.

Dawlish, where he recovered some of his health, settled Robertson Nicoll's fate, and incidentally, when one thinks of the political influence, overt and secret, that he subsequently attained, it settled some at least of the fate of the British Empire a generation later. He was in close touch with Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton, who at the moment had the idea of taking over the

old *British Quarterly Review*, discarding its specifically Congregationalist character and converting it into a general Nonconformist monthly with Nicoll as editor. When that plan failed, Nicoll at once submitted an idea of his own for a Nonconformist weekly on entirely new lines. After due consideration Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton decided to risk it. The venture involved a good deal of money, but their experience of Nicoll was an assurance of success. The assurance was made doubly sure by the fact that the hard-bitten Aberdonian undertook to work without salary until the paper began to pay.

All the same the *British Weekly* project as finally settled was a severe test of faith. For though Nicoll agreed to work for nothing, he exacted his price, which was that he should have an absolutely free hand in the conduct of the paper. And that was a heavy price for any honest merchant adventurers in the publishing line to be required to pay. Though he had shown remarkable aptitude for journalism, Nicoll had never been more than a half-timer. He was only thirty-five years of age. He was a chronic invalid, who had to do a large part of his work in bed. He was a Scotsman whose total residence in England was reckoned in weeks, and he had a full share of the Presbyterian Scot's antipathy to English Nonconformity. "If I had to stay here", he wrote from Dawlish, "I should be forced to go to the English Church. No

educated man could stand the Dissenters.” His political opinions were equally unfortunate. He professed to be a Liberal, but he was bitterly opposed to Home Rule. He detested Gladstone and adored Chamberlain. Such was the man who, in 1886, proposed to edit a popular weekly that should be an organ of Nonconformity and Gladstonian Liberalism.

The *British Weekly* did pay. Its success, not merely in circulation and profits but in material influence, has established Robertson Nicoll with Alfred Harmsworth and W. T. Stead as one of the three great journalists of the closing nineteenth century. He had not the imperial genius of Harmsworth for exploitation that knew no tradition, no law, no morality but its own. He had neither the invention nor the picturesqueness of Stead, still less had he Stead’s disconcerting moral fervour. But he had more humanity than Harmsworth, more sagacity than Stead, and far more culture than both of them put together. Harmsworth built his great enterprise upon a very simple piece of observation, viz. that owing to the Education Act of 1872 a large proportion of the adult population of London in the ’nineties were able to read ordinary words of two or even three syllables, that in due course the whole adult population would be in the same happy condition, and that in the meantime this educated democracy had nothing to practise its reading on. Nicoll, when he started the *British Weekly*

a decade earlier than the *Daily Mail*, noted a similar but less depressing fact. The icy Puritanism that bound Nonconformity was beginning to break up. The effects of the removal of the civil disabilities of Dissenters were becoming manifest. Chapel folk were beginning to look about and take an interest in things and even ideas. They were tenacious of their old beliefs and prejudices, yet they wanted to be told, decently and in a way they could understand, something of the general intellectual life of the time. Being human they could be impressed by the "stunt". That noble journalistic device had just been invented by Stead, and Nicoll was quick to appreciate its value—indeed, if Stead had not invented it he would have invented it. At any rate he started the *British Weekly* on one, a religious census of London which excited a gratifying amount of lively discussion. This he followed up by having each week an article by a "big name", but he did not continue it long. His eye was never off the weekly returns, and he marked and inwardly digested the fact that the circulation of the paper, so far from rising, actually dropped 200 in the week he published an article by R. L. Stevenson. Thenceforward he knew the limitations of the "stunt" as well as its value. As to big names, the *British Weekly* would in future have none but those the editor made big, with his own as the biggest of all.

Dr. Darlow, whose opinion is entitled to the

greatest respect, has said that for all his knowledge and insight Robertson Nicoll never really understood the Nonconformists. This is quite true if understanding be assumed to include sympathy and instinctive liking, of which Nicoll assuredly had none. “No educated man could stand the Dissenters.” That casual remark, made when he first came to live in England, revealed an attitude that could never be changed, however skilfully it might be disguised. For, with the best will in the world, no Presbyterian Scot—and Nicoll was a thorough Scot and a Presbyterian in grain—can ever bring himself to feel kindly towards an English Dissenter. There are several reasons for this, but in the main it is the dissidence of English Dissent that repels him, its apparent defiance of the national *Kultur*, a reproach that, in spite of bitter feuds and secessions, can never be cast up against Scottish Presbyterianism. Nevertheless, under the benign influence of the aphorism that “business is business”, Robertson Nicoll soon learned to be tolerant of what he did not like, and even if he could not achieve sympathy it cannot be said that he lacked an understanding of his Nonconformist public sufficient for all the practical purposes he had in mind. And on the whole it is to the advantage of him who drives fat oxen that he should not himself be fat. There is a most revealing letter written before the *British Weekly* was a month old.

“It is a great mistake of W.,” he writes, “to think that he has nothing to learn from Spurgeon. And that attitude makes Spurgeon angry and alienated. We cannot overlook facts—and the fact is that the Spurgeonic type of preaching is the only kind that moves the democracy. I know there are very repulsive elements about all that set of people. But I know, and so do you, that they are the salt of the earth. My great desire is to treat them with sympathy and respect, and so be able to teach them by degrees more charitable views.”

The quality of the writer's sympathy is distinctly strained, but his understanding is acute enough.

For a year this frail creature with his broken lung carried on the *British Weekly* single-handed. He was his own staff and his own chief and by far most trusted contributor. It was only when success was assured that he accepted the luxury of an assistant editor. Yet, while the paper always bore the mark of a single directing and informing personality, it never had the shabby-genteel appearance of the one-man journalistic show. It was an achievement worthy of rank with La Tour d'Auvergne's exploit, though it did not always excite the same unmixed admiration. For as time went on and Nicoll's pen invaded other journals than his own, the idea got about that there was some sinister purpose behind all this activity. Andrew Lang (who

should certainly have been the last person to cast a stone) broke into satirical triolets in the *Morning Post*, and Conan Doyle in the *Daily Chronicle* accused Nicoll of being the head of a vast log-rolling industry. The culprit was not perturbed. “One has vexatious things,” he once wrote to a friend early in his career, “but I do not get into tempers as a rule; it is so exhausting. No; the secret of tranquillity is ‘adopt the recumbent position’.” To Conan Doyle’s choler he replied mildly that he reviewed books because it was an agreeable way of making a little money. And he added with a sly humility: “I have no doubt that Dr. Doyle has received more for one novel than I have ever received for all the criticisms I have ever written. *Non equidem invideo: miror magis.*” Probably he was over-modest about his profits. In his later years, at any rate, Robertson Nicoll could and did command very large prices. But it was strictly true that he never had any more sinister object in writing than to get paid for what he wrote.

As an editor Nicoll has been credited with being a great discoverer of literary talent, and there is no doubt that he liked to be thought of as one who could make reputations at will. But his success in that way, though considerable, has been exaggerated chiefly owing to the skill with which he exploited that travesty of Scottish character known as the “Kailyard School”.

But he did not discover Barrie—Frederick Greenwood has that honour—and he did not discover Crockett, though he was quick to appropriate them both to his own purposes. The only member of the Kailyard trio that he did actually unearth was “Ian Maclaren”, and his manner of doing so was characteristic. The Rev. John Maclaren Watson, minister of Sefton Park Presbyterian Church, Liverpool, enjoyed a high reputation as a preacher. Nicoll asked him to contribute some articles to *The Expositor* and, never having met him, invited him to Hampstead to discuss the matter. First impressions were not favourable. “He stayed with us three nights”, Nicoll wrote to a friend, “and was very pleasant, but somehow I did not take to him as much as I expected; he was too cynical for me.” But the cynical fellow could tell a good sentimental story, and his host took to him enough to leave him no peace until he promised to write some articles on the same lines for the *British Weekly*. The result (after one or two false starts) was the profitable welter of sentiment known in book-form as *The Bonnie Brier Bush*. After that Nicoll ceased to have qualms about Watson’s cynicism. Other people may find it less easy to forgive Nicoll his charity.

The only other “discoveries” that can fairly be claimed for Robertson Nicoll were Hale White and Dr. R. J. Campbell. The former he did not exactly discover, but he saved him from

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obscurity and raised him to something like a vogue, which was a work of merit. Whether “Mark Rutherford” deserves all the fine words that “Claudius Clear” has lavished on him is for later writers to determine. The interesting thing here is that “Mark Rutherford” evoked the nearest approach to a real enthusiasm that Nicoll ever betrayed. The case of Dr. Campbell was quite different. He was started frankly as a “stunt”, and when, after a short and dazzling run, he developed in ways undreamt of in the Nicoll philosophy there was a good deal of unpleasantness. For Nicoll was most intolerant in everything that touched the curious blend of theology and journalism that was his main business. The man who did not conform to his special canons in that regard might be used, but there was a private black mark registered against him that sooner or later would become effective, and which represented not only disapproval but personal distaste. Reference has already been made to Nicoll’s alienation from Robertson Smith. There were other able men in his own denomination towards whom he showed a like antipathy. For A. B. Bruce, a great scholar and a great Christian, he seldom had anything but a sneer. To T. M. Lindsay he was respectful but distant. Henry Drummond he utterly despised, though he was not above taking advantage of the popularity of *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*. When planning the first number of the *British Weekly*

he asked Drummond for an article on the Irish question, yet with searchings of heart which he expressed in a letter to Dr. Marcus Dods: "To tell you the truth, I felt great compunction in asking his help, for I cannot believe that all that evangelising, banqueting, reconciling and philandering can ever be the material of a sincere and healthy life." And years afterwards, when Drummond was dead, he could say: "The book [Sir G. A. Smith's *Life of Drummond*] confirms what I never could help feeling—that Drummond was a charlatan, in the sense that he was always trying tasks far beyond him. . . . And how remarkably absent are any traces of serious reading and thought—even reading of any kind. He was as ill-read as a bishop." Uncharitable and supercilious judgments, no doubt, but not so very wide of the mark. Robertson Nicoll was seldom wide of the mark. Huckster he was, charlatan never, and it was with characteristic acumen that he defined the charlatan as one who attempts tasks beyond his power. His own aim was good because he remained always with perfect honesty within the limits of his endowment.

Nicoll developed several other journalistic enterprises beside the *British Weekly*—notably *The Bookman*, the first literary journal to realise the possibilities of the half-tone block—but by far the greatest engine of his influence was the "Correspondence of Claudius Clear" which he

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started in the second year of the *British Weekly* and continued without a break until his death. As a journalistic *tour de force* one must simply applaud it: articulate praise would be an impertinence. “Claudius Clear” never said a single great thing—it is not the business of a journalist to say great things even if he could—but he was always saying good things, and his manner of saying them entitles him to rank as the perfect stylist of popular English journalism. His versatility was bewildering. He could write of a forgotten book picked out of the twopenny box like Mr. E. V. Lucas, of a cold in the head (Nicoll always had a cold) like Mr. Lynd, of a Puritan mystic like Dr. Alexander Whyte with authority, and in a manner all his own about any perfectly uninteresting acquaintance who had the misfortune to turn up in the obituary column of *The Times*. From time to time Nicoll published collections of these papers in book-form, and anyone who cares to turn to them even at this time of day will find them uncommonly good and fresh reading.

Upon the death of R. H. Hutton, who was one of his idols, “Claudius Clear” wrote: “Journalists often forget that they are writing for a baptized people, but the editors of the *Spectator* did not, and have had their reward.” The coolness of the observation rather takes one’s breath away, yet it was written without any sense of impropriety. Robertson Nicoll acted

upon it all his life, and he too had his reward. He had it to a greater degree than was ever deemed possible in Hutton's day. It took the form of hard cash in ample measure, academic honours, a knighthood, a Companionship of Honour, and—though he had no great interest in politics—an amazing amount of political influence, especially in the later stages of the Great War, when perplexed statesmen were glad to have his advice. It is said that nobody ever regretted having taken it.

Robertson Nicoll's temper when crossed was formidable, and he was capable of bitter and savage invective that made the boldest quail. There was a sinister streak in him, redeeming him always in the last resort from commonplaceness, and giving him his peculiar though never obvious quality. In the ordinary way of life he was the quiet almost timid man, apparently true to type, clumsy and uncouth in his habits, absorbed in his job, gentle in the domestic circle, beloved by his few friends. He was a good talker among his intimates, whom he chose from men of the world who could have no possible theological contacts with him. In general he was inclined to play up to the part of the Scotsman of English tradition—the broad-spoken, sentimental, Sabbath-observing, casuistical, contentious, industrious, "bang went saxpence" Scotsman, and it cannot be said that in so doing he did himself any injustice. He was that Scotsman.

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But he was other things as well. He died at Hampstead on May 4, 1923, in his seventy-second year, the cleverest, shrewdest Scot of his generation,

. . . facetus

emunctae naris, durus componere versus :
nam fuit hoc vitiosus : in hora saepe ducentos,
ut magnum, versus dictabat stans pede in uno.

THE END