

Scottish Men of Letters

CHAPTER IV

PRINCIPAL ROBERTSON

“TOM BIRCH,” said Dr. Johnson, “is a dead hand at a life.” What was said of the biographical efforts of the Rev. Thomas Birch may, we fear, be said with equal justice of Professor Dugald Stewart’s Lives of his friends, Robertson, Reid, and Adam Smith. The sentences flow on from this “elegant exponent of Scottish philosophy” with rhetorical fluency, the sonorous periods are well poised, the pompous paragraphs finely rounded, but they utterly fail to present the personality of the men. To condescend to anecdote was beneath his professional dignity - an indecorous concession to trivial taste. We get, therefore, colourless sketches, instead of living portraits. [“I hate biography, and scarcely know whose Life I would not rather have written than Robertson’s,” he writes to Alison (Stewart’s *Works*, x. p. 75).] Dr. Robertson deserved a little more than this, and the world would have liked something else about a man who fills such a prominent place in the literary and ecclesiastical life of his time. With his suave manners, his dignified air, his punctilious ways (his own sisters were careful to address him respectfully as “Sir” [*Life and Times of Lord Brougham*, i. p. 35.]), he had all the qualities which constitute an admirable man - an important though not a vivacious personage, a divine who seldom made a joke and never made a blunder. Everything he did had an air of propriety; everybody spoke respectfully of him - not with the affection they bore to David Hume, not with the pride they showed in Adam Smith, not with the kindness they felt for John Home and Dr. Blair, with their guileless vanities; but with an esteem they felt it a duty to pay. His character was as well composed as any page of his Histories.

Born in 1721 in the manse of Borthwick, in Midlothian, he belonged, like so many of the ministers of that time, to families of good lineage and position. In 1733 the Rev. William Robertson, his father, became minister of Lady Yester’s in Edinburgh, and three years later of Greyfriars’. He was a man of learning, of refined tastes and some poetical gifts, as some paraphrases by him, sung still in the churches of Scotland, serve to prove. [Paraphrases beginning - 1. You now must hear my voice no more. 2. How few receive with cordial faith. 3. Let not your hearts with anxious thoughts. Julian’s *Dict. of Hymnology*, p. 968.] His son was only eleven years old when he entered College, after

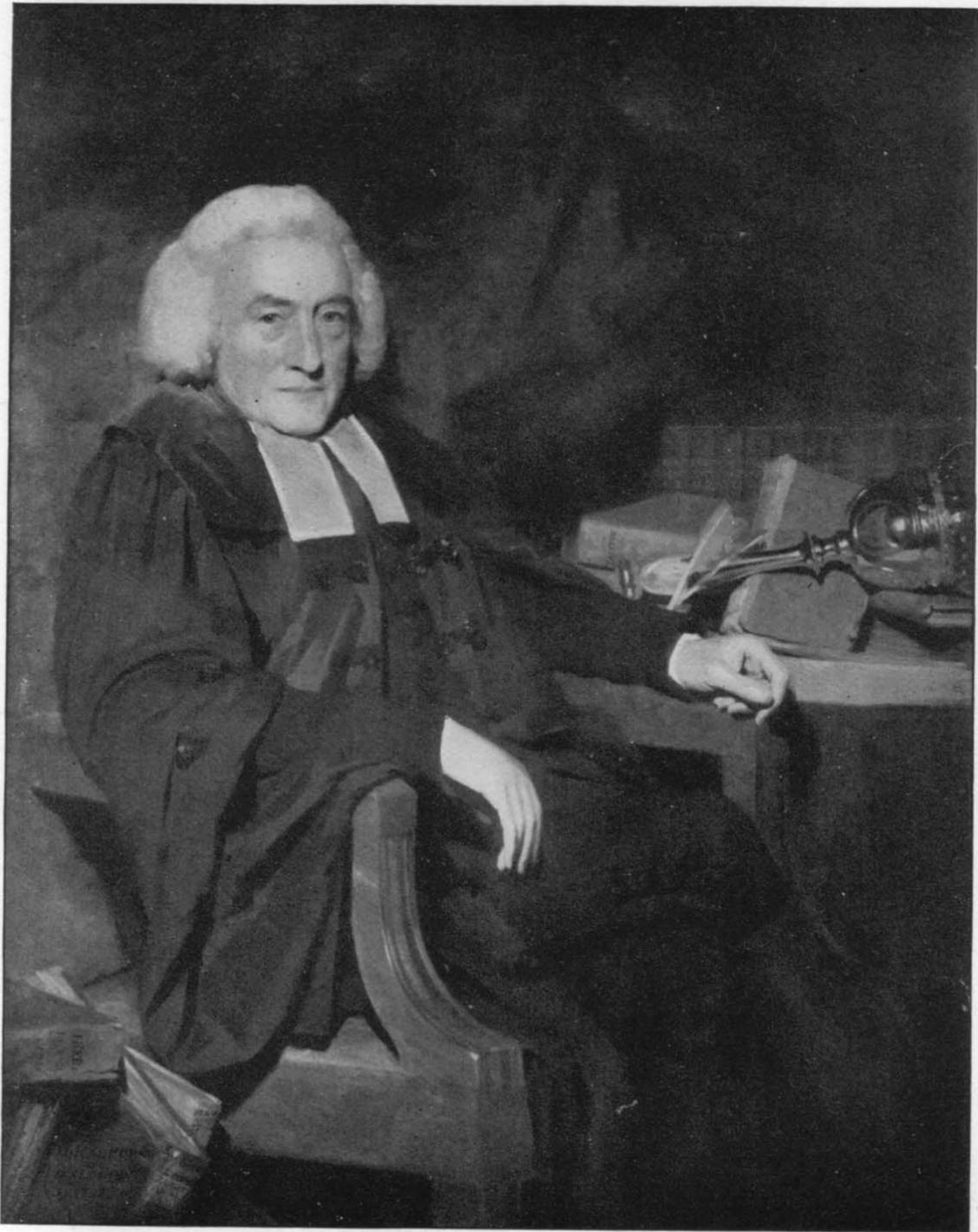
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having attended the famous Grammar School of Dalkeith. As class-mates he had John Home, John Erskine, William Wilkie, in the rooms where the famous Colin Maclaurin lectured on natural philosophy, the versatile Sir John Pringle taught not too profoundly moral philosophy, and Dr. Stevenson expounded with stimulating spirit logic and rhetoric. In 1743 he was licensed to preach, and two years afterwards succeeded his uncle as minister of Gladsmuir. During that year his father died, and in a few days later his mother was buried beside her husband, and the family was left in poverty. But in his Manse Robertson gave a welcome home to his brother and six sisters - bringing them up, educating them, and maintaining them till they were settled in the world - with fine devotion postponing his marriage for eight years for their sakes.

When the rebellion of '45 broke out he cast off his gown and shouldered his musket, to join with other loyal friends the ranks of Edinburgh volunteers, who enlisted with quivering courage to defend the city from the rebels. To cool the dauntless ardour of the students, a body of professors and clergy appealed to them with deep, but quite unnecessary emotion, that they should not endanger their precious lives and deprive by their rashness the country of the flower of its youth. [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 118.] When the pusillanimous bands of citizens withdrew to the security of their wynds, and a stalwart few boldly advanced to the West Port - and stayed there - Robertson and some comrades set forth to join Sir John Cope's forces, only to find that their gallant services were declined, evidently as being more likely to help the rebels than the loyalists.

He was more successfully employed in his parish. Busy with his pastoral work, visiting the sick, catechising the young, he was beloved by his people, and his whole conduct falsified the charges of persons who, knowing little and vilifying much, proclaim that a "moderate" was a man without earnestness, a minister who preached moral duties, while lamentably lacking in piety. Up early in the morning, [Brougham's *Men of Letters*, 1845, p. 262.] he devoted himself to classics and the study of literature, which had engaged him since his student days, when he filled commonplace books inscribed with their grave motto *Vita sine literis mors est*. He had good society around him in country mansions, and congenial companionships in country manses - especially with easy-humoured John Home at Athelstaneford, keen-witted Alexander Carlyle at Inveresk, and many a scholarly clergymen in neighbouring parishes. He was within an easy ride of Edinburgh, where he could see Blair and Wilkie, Hume and Lord Elibank; and after 1755 he would turn up at the meetings of the Select Society and Poker Club, where he took a prominent part

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From the Painting by Raeburn in Edinburgh University.

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in their debates and a modest share in their festivities.

It was in Church courts, however, that he was first to make himself distinguished, especially in the General Assembly.

The ecclesiastical parliament was an affair of importance in those days - the centre of interest, and often the scene of excitement. Proceedings in the House of Commons were little thought of and little known in Scotland. Two or three pages of the *Scots Magazine* gave a bald outline of the debates, which had lost their interest long before they were printed, and, after all, concerned English or foreign affairs that few persons north of the Tweed cared anything about. In the Assembly, however, Church questions were discussed which concerned Scotsmen far more than any matters of State, and in them men of light and leading in Scotland took part.

In the dark, dirty aisle of the High Kirk this Assembly met. There were the high box-pews, above which the heads of the reverend occupants could hardly be seen; there were the dusty galleries, in which the audience sat listening intently to harangues and "cases"; on a gilt throne upon a platform, with dingy velvet hangings, sat the Lord High Commissioner with two or three courtly satellites around him, having made his appearance thither from Fortune's tavern, heading a modest walking procession consisting of some magistrates, with city guards bearing halberds in front, and a bevy of ladies in hoops and newest gowns behind. Just below the throne, in a square pew - in which the elders sat on Sunday listening to Dr. Blair's placid eloquence - were the Moderator and clerks in their robes and ruffles and best curled wigs, round the green table. The whole scene was more quaint than splendid, for St. Giles', though a State church, was not a church of state.

In those days appeared strange contrasts of clerical types at that meeting. There were Gaelic ministers, speaking with high nasal tones, dressed in home-spun coats, coarse brown wigs, plaid stockings, and latchet shoes, who had come from distant straths and storm-swept isles of the Hebrides to attend the annual gathering and to see the wonders of the capital. There were rough-clad ministers from remote Galloway or Caithness, who had travelled for days on vile roads, over which their poor nags staggered, putting up at wretched ale-houses by the way, and finally to be not better sheltered in stabling-houses in the Grassmarket. There came men of birth and good breeding, living on their stipends of £70 or less, who then abounded in the church, making the Assembly distinguished for culture and learning. [Mackenzie's *Life of Home*, p. 8; Carlyle's *Autobiography*, chap. vi.; Somerville's *Memoirs*, p. 96; Pennant's *Tour*; Cockburn's *Memorials*, p. 236, all testify to the high social standing and ability of the clergy at that time.] Beside them

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were clerical magnates - city ministers and professors - with wigs well-powdered and many-curled, in blue English broadcloth, silk stockings, and buckled shoes, who, as they walked with gold-headed canes, exchanged greetings with my Lord Galloway or ventured on a seemly joke with the Lord President.

Men of great ability sat in that reverend court - many then great whose fame has vanished long since. People used to speak in awe of Principal Tullidolph of St. Andrews, who had once been an officer in the Swedish army, as he stood with his gaunt form, his haughty presence, possessed of commanding eloquence rarely equalled in any senate, and likened to that of the elder Pitt. Among the ranks of the party called "Evangelical" or "popular" by their friends (but styled "high-fliers," the "wild," or "fanatical party" by their opponents) was the tall, handsome person of Dr. Alexander Webster, with the fluent tongue, persuasive, unctuous speech, which was so fervid in the pulpit and so genial in society, where he drank portentously and remained erect when the strongest brothers of the bottle were recumbent beneath the table. Contrasting with this convivial man of business and piety was Dr. John Erskine, with a tiny form and benign face, a saint in jet-black wig, zealous for the faith to his finger-tips. In pews facing the Evangelical party sat the Moderates - most of whom were young. Prominent was Professor Patrick Cuming, courtly, plausible, and pliant, the henchman of Lord Islay, who was ruling the political affairs of Scotland, and who trusted this ecclesiastic, whom his own party were apt to doubt. Dr. Jardine sat near him, towering in his height of six feet two, orthodox in doctrine, yet most tolerant by nature, a caustic wit, a pious pastor, though the beloved companion of David Hume. Among the young men were Carlyle of Inveresk, whose presence would be notable anywhere with his tall form, finely-chiselled features, keen, shrewd eyes, and brown hair, then untarnished by powder - a sagacious speaker, a wise pacifier of strife; and John Home, young, good-humoured, facile of speech, but more able to follow than to lead. Dr. Hugh Blair, who was seldom in church courts, occasionally contributed to debates sensible utterances, which were feeble compared with the speeches of Dr. Robert Wallace of the Old Kirk - a man of the world, a brilliant mathematician and statistician of rare capacity, distinguished for learning, whom frequenters of the dancing assemblies consulted in his notes to *Gallini on Dancing*, which he wrote at the age of seventy-three, and whom scholars studied in his *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind*, which supplied in after years ideas and facts to Malthus for his famous work on Population. Soon above them all was to rise Dr. Robertson of Gladsmuir.

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These ministers, and others whose names now are no more than names, were able to hold their own in ability with the many brilliant elders who sat beside them - judges, advocates, lairds, and lords. Old President Dundas, with querulous face, keen ferret-like eyes, and croaking voice, in that assembly spoke with the authority he showed on the Bench. Lord Islay, afterwards Duke of Argyle, all-powerful with the Court, and dispenser of posts to a thousand obsequious countrymen, sat with Lord Milton, the Judge, who then as agent for his Grace, and afterwards as friend of Lord Bute, was a political power in the North. There, too, was Lord Marchmont, the admired of Alexander Pope, supercilious in manner, and graceful in speech which contrasted, like Lord Hailes's tones, learned at Eton, with the rough, uncouth, coarse Scots harangues of Lord Auchinleck. Among the members were young men who afterwards rose to high position - budding politicians, who were practising their oratory for Parliament, and lawyers preening their forensic wings for the Bar. Gilbert Elliot was acquiring over such questions as "moderation of calls" and "disputed settlements" a skill in debate which was to serve him in good stead when he sat on the Treasury Bench; and with high-set, mincing tones, Alexander Wedderburn - a douce elder at twenty-three - pronounced nimble speeches in those accents to which Mr. Love, the actor in the Canongate, was tutoring him, which in later years were to be heard from the Woolsack, when he sat as Lord Loughborough. Keen in support of the popular party was Andrew Crosbie ("Councillor Pleydell" of *Guy Mannering*), copious and declamatory, possessed of wit and humour, in spite of the solemnity of a countenance which grew more red by indulgence in "high jinks" which did not regard "elders' hours.," The younger lay ecclesiastical bloods and convivial old elders were wont to seek relaxation from their dry functions by adjourning to the "Diversorium," [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 309.] as they nicknamed the Carrier's Inn in the West Bow; and after exchanging the centre of gravity for that centre of levity, would resume their duties with fresh energy and flushed faces. While the debates proceeded, the rank and file of country ministers would bend their wigged heads over the tops of the high pews, discussing the arguments *sotto voce*, and exchanging confidential opinions and snuff-boxes, as that brilliant speaker, Mr. Andrew Pringle (afterwards Lord Almore), giving up for the occasion his part as an elder for that of an advocate at the bar, defended some ministerial culprit.

Into this ecclesiastical company in 1745 Robertson of Gladsmuir entered - in a few years to make his power felt and to shape the policy of the Church for thirty years. It was not yet the time that any young man had a chance of being listened to,

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for it had been long the custom for the moderator to call chiefly on judges and professors round the green table to address the house. When Dr. Webster, however, became moderator, he broke through the old practice; and younger men then had opportunities of acquiring distinction, [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 271.] while venerable guides of the Church looked on with disgust at the forwardness and audacity of "these young sparks." It was in 1751 Robertson made his first appearance in debate. A minister had been presented to the parish Torphichen; only six persons out of the whole population had signed the "call," and the presbytery therefore refused to induct the minister to a parish which was opposed to him. John Home, then a young man of twenty-nine, moved that the members of presbytery should be suspended from the ministry for their disobedience to the law, and Robertson seconded this motion in a speech of marked ability. They were able to muster only eleven supporters, and a milder motion, merely to censure, was carried by over 200. This was an age when the people were trying to domineer over the Church; year after year the time of the Assembly was occupied by disputed settlements, for the minister appointed the patron was constantly opposed by the parishioners. They would have rejected St. Paul, if a patron had presented him, certainly they would have refused to have St. James, because his was the doctrine of a "moderate," and they would have nailed up the kirk door and assaulted the presbytery that dared to induct him. Many of the clergy would not ordain an unpopular presentee: some because they did not like to go against their conscience, others because they were afraid to go against the people. In consequence, years of weary vexatious litigation often ensued before a man was installed in his parish - during which time the heritors were extremely patient, for they calmly pocketed the stipends.

But it was now becoming too much a scandal, that evangelical and "high-flying" ministers, who would have enforced the extreme penalty of law against any one who deviated by a hair's-breadth from the legal standard of orthodoxy, should themselves violate laws which they were equally bound to obey. After the Erskines and others of the popular party finally seceded in 1739, clergy became bolder in maintaining the law against the dictation of the people. Meanwhile the "moderate party" was getting stronger - consisting of men who preached the moral law in the pulpit, and maintained ecclesiastical law in the courts - and their influence became more marked year by year. Robertson showed himself and his friends more powerful on his second appearance. A minister who had been appointed to Inverkeithing, was opposed by the people. [Morren's *Annals of General Assembly*, ii. 222.] Thereupon the presbytery refused to induct him, and next year - 1752 - the case

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came before the General Assembly, who ordered the contumacious presbytery to carry out the law on a set day. The day for the induction came, but not the presbytery. Only three ministers appeared at the church of Inverkeithing, and these were not sufficient, for by a quite arbitrary command the Assembly had required six to be present. Robertson made a strong appeal to punish the offenders, and it was agreed that one of the six members who had not obeyed the order should be deposed "to encourage the others." They fixed on Mr. Thomas Gillespie of Carnock as a scapegoat, a man of singular piety and amiability, and straightway deposed him from the ministry; his words as he left the house ringing in their ears: "Moderator, I rejoice that to me is given in behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but to suffer for His sake." There was nothing of the rebel or the seceder in this man - the fanaticism of the Erskines he abhorred, and though in time he with others formed the Relief Kirk, his heart yearned to his dying day after the Church that had thrust him forth. If the law had to be vindicated, one would wish that a more offensive victim had been chosen. The young men being flushed with success, Carlyle next day proposed that more of the contumacious members should be deposed; but the party had won the day, and rested content with their victory.

From that date the influence of Robertson increased, and his principle was rigorously to enforce the law. He and his friends began a new and thorough policy. They would meet in a tavern at night - young ministers like himself and Carlyle and Home, and young elders like Gilbert Elliot of Minto and Wedderburn - to concert measures and tactics for the next day.

While the new rule was being firmly enforced, it is true discontent did not die out. Many became seceders, because their power to coerce patrons being gone, they could not reject the young moderates coming into the Church, who did not give the people the strain of preaching their souls yearned for - the fervid Calvinism, the favourite doctrines of election, reprobation, assurance, and free grace; the evangelical appeals to their fears and emotions. In the alarm at the widespread spirit of dissent, in 1765 a "Schism Act" was proposed by the popular party for the abatement of schism by a modification of the Act of Patronage, which had caused such dissatisfaction that there were 120 dissenting chapels, with 100,000 adherents - a number which struck dismay. There was perhaps wisdom in this proposal; but Robertson and his party would have none of it, and successfully opposed it with all their vigour. Robertson pleaded that the Act of Patronage of 1712 was the safeguard of the Church against bigotry, [Cunningham's *Church History of Scotland*, vol. ii. p. 528; Stewart's *Works*, x. p. 108. "At the Revolution the churches had been most filled with vulgar and illiterate men, Presbytery

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having been depressed and sometimes persecuted for twenty-eight years. From the Revolution to the year 1712, popular elections continued to debase the ministerial character. From that period to 1740 the certainty of opposition to every presentation unless the presentee accommodated himself to the humours of the people and the remaining ungentlemanly character of the clergy, deterred the liberal and ingenuous youth from entering into the Church. But after the secession [of 1739] the fear of the people gradually abated, and a set of young men entered into orders who had no need to put on the mask of hypocrisy. They added some degree of politeness and knowledge of the world to their superior learning, and from slaves or demagogues of a bigotted populace they became companions and friends of the superior orders. No change was more rapid and complete, and at the same time less in the extreme. Unreasonable restraints only were removed. Innocent amusements were no longer looked on as indecorums, nor indecorums considered as crimes; while the discipline of the Church prevented or checked all improper freedoms in the manners of the clergy, and manly and liberal behaviour was now sufficiently encouraged." - From an able MS. "Memorial about State of the Church, 1784," by Dr. A. Carlyle, to William Pitt.] dulness, and fanaticism; he maintained that before that time the clergy had been of mean abilities, of low breeding, and gross fanaticism; but since Patronage was established, men of higher culture and tolerance had been coming into the Church. Dr. Robertson spoke truly when he attributed to the system of Patronage the advent of men of learning and talent into the Church - especially after it was upheld by the Assembly fearless of popular clamour. Had they depended on the suffrages of the people, there would have been little chance of a living for Blair or Robertson, for Principals Campbell and Leechman, or Professor Reid; yet more pious men than these moderates were nowhere to be found. There would have been no place for Carlyle and Home, afterwards beloved by their parishioners. Professor Matthew Stewart, Professor Playfair, and Dr. Wallace, if they had only the vulgar choice of the people to depend on, would never have entered the ministry and brought science into the Church. It was after hot debate on this Schism overture, as the votes were being taken, that Dr. Jardine - Hume's dear friend - fell dead in the Assembly.

The speeches of Dr. Robertson, though delivered in broad accents, with stiff ungraceful action, were admirably effective in debate, while his firm, yet politic policy, and mild persuasive manners were irresistible. He could win over the dourest country opponent to his side, and soothe the most ruffled judge to acquiescent smiles. During what was called "Robertson's administration," of thirty years, when, by adroit diplomacy, he carried any measure he pleased, he maintained the independence and dignity of the General Assembly: no dictation by the Crown, no menace of the Government's displeasure would have a weight, or ever was attempted, after he directed the affairs of the Church. Perhaps his suave, tactful style as "party manager" made his friends less enthusiastic in his praise. At table they would have preferred less of the speech-maker and more of the conversationalist; in private they would have liked less of the diplomatist, greedy of praise, and more of the cheerful abandon of the companion. When Robertson was beginning to make

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his position as an ecclesiastic in Church courts, at home he was busy with literary studies, and intent in his little book-room at Gladsmuir since 1752, writing a History of Mary and James I. There was at this time a bent given to Scotsmen towards historical study. Scots antiquaries for many years had been producing treatises on Scottish historical questions. Ruddiman and other erudite Tories had been belabouring George Buchanan for his pestilent heresies regarding Queen Mary, and his fraudulent perversion of facts, while Whigs joined in the fray and lauded his pious memory in pamphlets and octavos in which the composition was vile and the vituperation was villainous. Tractates on chartularies and pedigrees occupied the leisure and exercised the temper of scholars, who always become irascible when they deal with antiquities. Hume was engaged on his *History of England*; and Robertson now began his *History of Scotland*, choosing a period which fascinated Scotsmen, Whig and Tory alike. Many a time he rode to Edinburgh to consult at the Advocates' Library, in which David Hume had succeeded the redoubtable old Thomas Ruddiman in the post of keeper, and where Walter Goodall, the learned, erratic, and fiery controversialist, was assistant. Many a point the suave minister would debate with that keen Maryite and Jacobite - if he happened to be sober, for the red-faced "Wattie" was constantly intoxicated, and controversially stood up for the maligned queen when physically he could hardly stand up himself. [Chalmers's *Life of Ruddiman*, p. 132.]

The intervals of study and work were spent by Robertson with his favourite friends, visits to Lord Elibank, walks and discussions on historical points with Hume - for "David," as he called him, was one of his closest companions. He was full of interest in John Home's *Douglas*, which all his confidants were reading in manuscript, and the public were waiting to see on the stage. It is certain that he did not - as a story alleged [Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle, 21st January 1829. Though possibly present when *Douglas* was read at the tavern, for against Carlyle the Presbytery cited Robertson and Blair, among witnesses ranging from Lord Elibank to the theatre "candle-snuffer."] - act in any rehearsal, taking the part of Lord Randolph; neither did he ever go to see it performed. That, however, was not owing to cowardice or caution; it was to conform to the wish of his dead father that he should never enter a play-house - for he had been austere trained in a household where cards, play-acting, and dancing were regarded as vices. [Stewart's *Works*, x. p. 110; Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 292; Brougham's *Men of Letters*, p. 257, 1845.] Even when in London, and in close intimacy with Garrick, he resisted loyally the temptation to visit Drury Lane Theatre, to see the great actor as Lysander in his friend Home's *Agis*, though in private Henderson, the actor, would give him specimens of his art,

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and Garrick would personate King Lear and Abel Drugger. His very aloofness from the audacities of his brother clergymen, and his dignified attitude, gave him more power and influence in defending their conduct and the stage in church courts.

In 1758 the *History of Scotland* was ready for the press, and it was necessary to seek a publisher. So on horseback he set forth to London, on his arrival feeling strange and awkward in the unknown capital. There his friend Carlyle found him, showed him the sights, introduced him to the famous Scotsmen in town, took him, of course, to the British Coffee-House and Forest's Tavern, where his countrymen most did congregate, and where he met Smollett and Armstrong, the Hunters, the famous surgeons, Sir Gilbert Elliot, now Lord of the Admiralty, and Wedderburn, now rising at the bar, who, he was gratified to learn from the door-keeper of the House of Commons, spoke "devilish good English." John Home, who since his resignation of the Church was secretary to Lord Bute, was entirely at his lordship's command, and dared not be away an hour lest he should be summoned from his lodging in South Audley Street. When my lord dined out, however, he was free, and then he bounded forth like a lamb frisking in the meadows, to join in exuberant spirits his old friends, full of his *Agis*, which was being acted in Drury Lane. There was an excursion to Garrick's house at Hampton Court, [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 344.] where Home was often an intimate guest with the lively actor and his charming wife. They played golf, drank tea in the temple of Shakespeare, and came back delighted - Carlyle with tact refraining from reminding the hostess that he remembered coming over from Holland with her when she was only Middle. Violetti, the dancer. Publishers having been found in Millar and Cadell, and a printer in William Strahan, Carlyle, Robertson, and Home (who was returning to the North) rode merrily and adventurously back to Scotland.

In 1759, in two quarto volumes, the *History* came out. In less than a month the first edition was exhausted, and Robertson's praises were in all circles. Historical writing was a forgotten art; a good history of England was unknown till Hume wrote his volumes on James I. and Charles I., and Smollett issued his facile narrative, which had appeared the year before. Here was another work by a Scotsman, and fascinating too in spite of its subject being Scottish. It did not stir up rampant rage of either Whig or Tory, as Hume's had done. It gave little offence by its tone, and though it was adverse to Queen Mary, "it cut like a razor dipped in oil" some one said. As became the leader of the moderates, it was written with moderation. The age was too much accustomed to formal diction to carp at the style as being stiff and pompous, and it welcomed a narrative animated and vigorous.

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David Hume, who was then in London, transmitted joyously every word of praise he heard, and wrote with friendly banter, "A plague take you! Here I sat on the historical summit of Parnassus, immediately under Dr. Smollett, and you have the impudence to squeeze past me and place yourself directly under his feet!" [Burton's *Life of Hume*, ii. 54.] He wrote to his friend that Lord Mansfield did not know whether to esteem more the matter or the style; that Mr. George Grenville remarked that "had the author lived all his life in London, and in the best company, he could not have expressed himself with greater elegance and purity"; that the Prince and Princess of Wales were reading it. For once Horace Walpole was sincere when he spoke his eulogies. When in London Robertson had modestly called on him. "How could I suspect," wrote Walpole [Walpole's *Letters*, iii. p. 202.] in one of his letters, "that a man whose dialect I scarce understood, and who came to me with all the diffidence and modesty of a very middling author, and who, I was told, had passed all his life in a small living near Edinburgh - could I suspect that he had not only written what all the world now allows the best modern history, but that he had written it in the purest English, and with as much seeming knowledge of men and courts as if he had passed all his life in important embassies." All this was pleasant. Hume had written pages crawling with Scotticisms, notwithstanding his acquaintance with the English world, and yet Robertson, who spoke Scots, and had never been out of Scotland, wrote English almost without reproach. It is true, he had submitted his manuscript to Sir Gilbert Elliot and William Strahan to revise and to remove what Johnson called "colloquial barbarisms," but it was his careful study of literature that had guided his style. [Macaulay, in his slap-dash style, asks a question on Robertson's last work, which there are no readers to answer: "Are there not in the *Dissertation on India* Scotticisms at which a London apprentice would laugh?" (*Essay on Addison*).] For this History the author got £600, and by it Millar and Cadell cleared £6000. Naturally Bishops thought such a man was far too good to be a Presbyterian, and kindly recommended Robertson, as they did Blair and Beattie, to enter their Church. This generous invitation was very firmly declined.

Honours now fell thick upon the historian. He became minister of the Greyfriars' the year on which his History appeared. Three years later, 1762, at the age of forty-one, he was appointed Principal of the University, and in the following year he was chosen Moderator of the General Assembly, of which he was the distinguished leader. The office of Historiographer of Scotland was also given him, with a salary of £200 a year - a preferment which a little hurt the feelings, though it did not excite the jealousy, of his friend and rival historian, David Hume. From the obscurity of a country parish, with a stipend of about £80, he had now become

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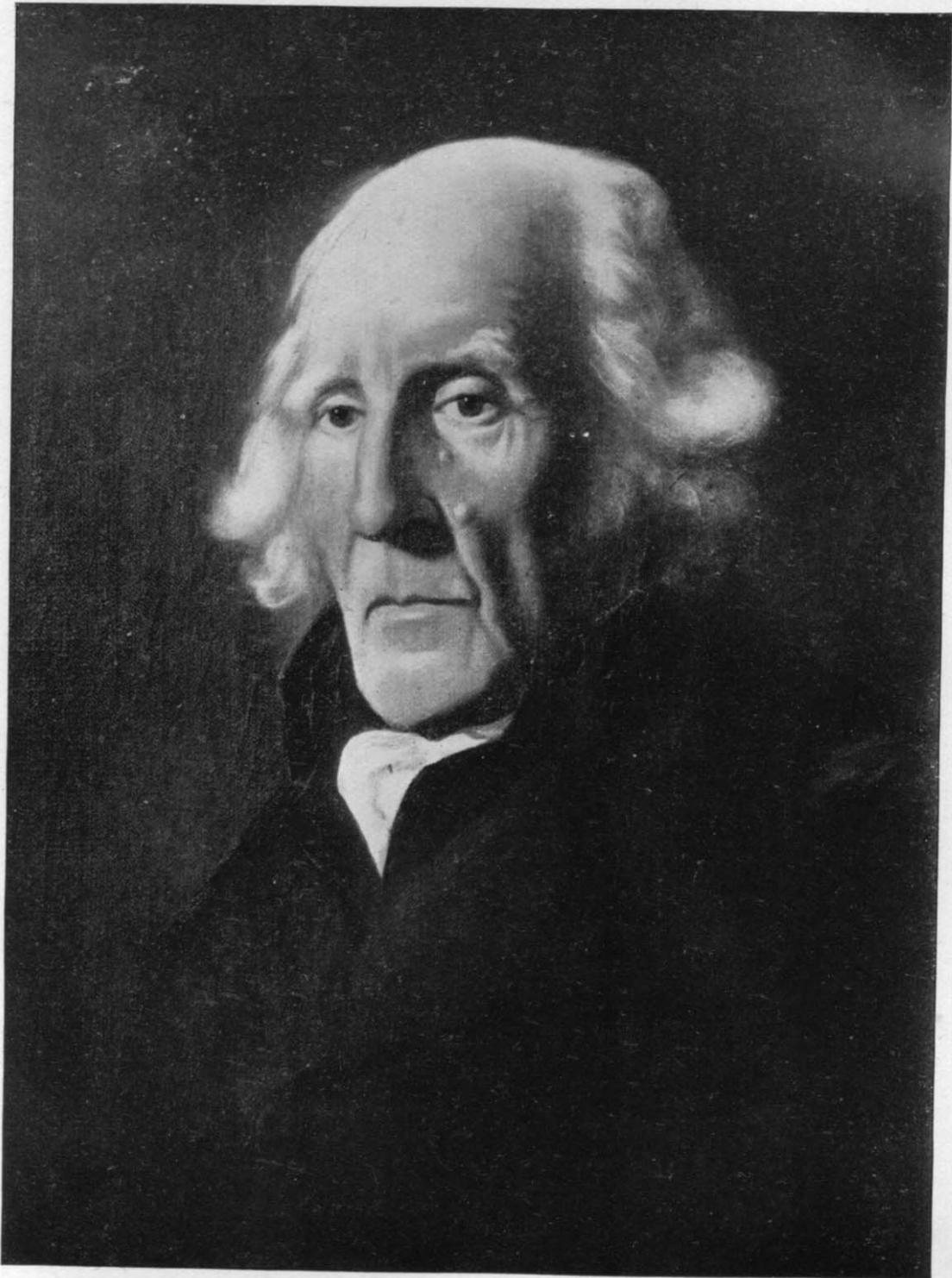
a man of wealth - as clerical wealth was reckoned in those poor days - and he was noted as the first minister in Scotland who kept a carriage.

Dr. Robertson lived till he became Principal in a house at the head of the Cowgate, now the most squalid of Edinburgh squalid districts. There he kept boarders, like most city ministers and professors in those impecunious days, for English noblemen were in the habit of sending their sons to Edinburgh for the efficient and sedate college training they could not get at Oxford or Cambridge. In society he was prominent, as befitted his position of importance. Courteous and pleasing, with his bland and intelligent face and keen eyes, his presence gave an air of propriety to any company, as he sat in his well-fitting garments, his prim clerical bands, his legs crossed, displaying the neatest of silver-buckled shoes. His talk, agreeable but rather too instructive, came forth in strong Scots tongue, with a fluency which at times was too flowing for those who wished to speak as well as he. Friends rather resented his propensity, which increased with years, to lead the talk, and they murmured that whenever the cloth was removed after dinner and the wine appeared on the shining mahogany, the doctor would settle himself with deliberation in his chair, introduce some topic, and discourse thereon till general talk ceased. He would take the opinions and thoughts that his friends uttered yesterday and present them in elegant paraphrase - "the greatest plagiary in conversation that I ever knew," says "Jupiter" Carlyle. His admiring biographer, Dugald Stewart, hints delicately at such colloquial defects, speaking of "his formal and artificial periods, the language of a strong and superior mind, which embellished every subject." [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 287; Stewart's *Works*, x. p. 187.] One day Adam Ferguson and Carlyle determined in malicious sportiveness to forestall the inevitable monologue. It was arranged that Carlyle should begin a long panegyric on a much-puffed patent mustard, and Ferguson privately told the Principal in a tone of deep concern that poor Carlyle was clearly going off his head, for he would speak of nothing but this wretched mustard, whereupon Robertson felt responsive concern for their friend. When the dinner was over, the good doctor settled himself to take his wonted lead, when the minister of Inveresk, in a manner *à la* Robertson, **broke in**, [Recollections by Sir Adam Ferguson, in *Chambers's Journal*, 1855. "Robertson's deficiencies were only observed by his friends, for his sagacity, power of colloquial eloquence, and his admirable talents of translation and making other men's thoughts his own, not only concealed the scantiness of his learning, but gave him an air of superiority that was very imposing. . . . At no time did Blair ever betray any sentiment that was unworthy of his profession or character, though he was perfectly open and unreserved. But Robertson's great love of dissertation made him not only sometimes tedious to his friends, who knew all his topics, but sometimes ensnared him into too free communications with young people, and raised in them a false idea that his principles were not so sound as they expected. As for instance when he used to expatiate on the folly of public men who did not make sure of something

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good for themselves, while they were serving their country. Such notions amazed the youths, who expected from him a splendid blazonry of a high standard of public virtue. Strange it was that so wise a man should have ever indulged himself in such intemperate talk. But the *cacoethes docendi* is as difficult to restrain as of *scribendi*. . . . Robertson was warped by the spirit of party, and was so much dazzled by the splendour of the French Revolution, that even his sagacity was imposed on, and he could not listen to the 'ravings' of Burke, as he called them." - From Dr. Carlyle's MSS. Mackenzie expresses a higher opinion of Robertson's conversation, *Life of Home*, p. 56.] "This is an age most notable for its momentous discoveries. Human ingenuity is exerted on the noblest things, and often with the most admirable effects on the meanest things. There is, for instance, an article of the humblest kind which has lately been wonderfully improved by a particular mode of preparation; and he, for his part, was inclined to say that patent mustard was the thing above all others which gave a distinguishing glory to the age. In the first place" - and so on the rigmarole proceeded - a good parody of his host's best manner. Robertson was dumfounded, saddened at his friend's mental state, while the confederates were delighted at having for one day stemmed the flow of their friend's harangue. There was something in the sententiousness and pomp of his manner in public which it was not difficult to imitate. One day, when the High Kirk was more than usually dark during the meeting of the General Assembly, that incorrigible mimic, Francis Cullen - afterwards Lord Cullen - when the Principal was absent, rose in the obscurity of the corner he usually occupied, and made a speech in voice, accent, argument, and style so exactly like the leader's, that every one thought that it was he who was speaking. Later in the debate Dr. Robertson came in and rose to make his speech, which proved so close a reproduction of Cullen's that every one was amazed, till it dawned on the House that a hoax had been perpetrated, and the reverend members roared with merriment, while the unconscious victim stared in mute wonderment. But all these things were done in good-humour, and the historian was one of the finest-tempered of men. No one, not even the boarders in his house [Brougham's *Men, of Letters*, p. 266.] had ever seen him ruffled. It was characteristic of the man that he objected to the over-display of feeling alike in sorrow and in mirth - censuring levity as unbecoming, and grief as ill-timed, for people should keep their troubles to themselves. [Brougham's *Men, of Letters*, p. 313.]

Genial and natural with intimate friends, it was in larger companies that he tried to shine most, but shone least successfully; with a manner awkward and fashion too formal. Dugald Stewart, in his usual style, which painfully resembles the historian's own, takes care to say that on "no occasion did he forget the dignity of his character or the decorum of his profession; nor did he ever lose sight of that classical taste which adorned his compositions." [Stewart's *Works*, x. pp. 138, 157.] Now, a conversational style which shows "classical taste" and is modelled after a history



DR. ALEXANDER CARLYLE

From a Painting by A. Skirving in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

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cannot be exactly considered exhilarating, but it had a sobering effect on company. Sitting at the Principal's well-plenished dinner-table, Lord Kames would subdue his coarse wit and reduce his language to propriety. Dr. Webster, who could discourse on the terrific woes of Hell and the seraphic joys of Heaven one day, and empty a "tappit hen" of its contents in hilarious joys on earth the next, kept both his unctuous fervour and his jovial qualities under control in his presence, and none could guess that this sedate divine was he whom society irreverently called "Dr. Bonum Magnum." Certainly the host could take no exception on the score of frivolity to Adam Smith, who was always instructive, or to Dr. Blair, to whom it was as difficult to see a joke as it was for himself to make one. It was with bland, kindly tolerance he bore the levity of those mirthful friends Ferguson and John Home, and the playfulness, which he called "infantine," of David Hume. Carlyle of Inveresk, with his vivacity and intellectual alertness, would keep the talk at its best, and Lord Elibank, the Jacobite, would utter quaint paradoxes in the squeakiest of voices. By the way, it may be remarked, his lordship and his friend Carlyle belong to those lucky mortals who live in tradition with the reputation of being able to write as well as anybody if they chose, and die without having risked the loss of it by writing anything at all. ["Dr. Carlyle wants nothing but inclination to figure with the rest of them on paper" (*Humphrey Clinker*). He only published pamphlets and wrote some verses; but left behind him his *Autobiography*, full of vivid pictures of his times and contemporaries.] There was preserved by the historian a quaint, old-fashioned formality of manner, as he addressed every lady as "Madam," and with stately bow would say, "My humble service to you," as he drank her health. The Principal was a dignified presence, both as he sat at table and as he walked down the High Street with his clerical bands fluttering in front, in cocked hat and bushy wig, and gold-headed stick in his hand.

Ten years passed by before he followed up his first literary success. Yet during that time he had not been idle. At first his design was to write a History of England. His friends at home, as well as Lord Chesterfield, who likened his style to Livy's, and King George - pronounced this a fit subject for his pen, and Lord Bute promised that the Government would put every source of information at his disposal. He himself felt that the post of Historiographer had been given to him on condition that he should undertake the work. [*Caldwell Papers*, ii. p. 284.] However, the project was abandoned, chiefly from reluctance to encroach on his friend Hume's special field. After hesitation and listening to conflicting counsels, he chose the History of Charles V. as his subject. Years of labour were devoted to reading and composition, though few Spanish sources of information were within his reach. In

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1769, in three volumes quarto, appeared the *History of the Reign of Charles V., with a View of the Progress of Society from the Subversion of the Roman Empire to the Commencement of the Sixteenth Century*. The author reaped £4000 - a sum for a history hitherto unknown in the annals of publishing, and the price shows the estimation in which the writer was held. Again the success was brilliant; again the praise was almost unanimous. Suard produced an admirable translation into French; Voltaire wrote flattering compliments in return for a copy; Catherine II. of Russia sent him a gold box set in diamonds in token of her admiration. It is true, Dr. Johnson protested to Boswell that the History was "a romance, cumbrous and tedious," and not to be compared in merit to poor Goldsmith's compilations. But no man uttered from sheer perversity more worthless colloquial verdicts than this autocrat of letters, whom, as Robertson complained at Sir Joshua Reynolds's, his admirers were "spoiling" by grovelling worship. Sterne was pooh-poohed by him, Churchill and Fielding were called "blockheads," and Gray was dubbed "a barren rascal." No wonder Scotsmen like Hume, Robertson, Home, and Adam Smith came under his indiscriminate flail. When Robertson was in London, he was shy of meeting the literary despot, knowing how Adam Smith had fared at his hands; yet when they met, Johnson took to this sensible Scotsman, who did not assert himself too much. "Sir, I love Robertson," he was pleased to say, "though I won't speak of -his books." Boswell represents the Principal as always in, awe of the dictator. When at his invitation Johnson met Blair and Robertson, with others, at the "Crown and Anchor," the party he asserts "hardly opened their mouths except to say something which they were certain would not expose them to the sword of Goliath." [Life of Johnson, edited by Hill, ii. 63; iii, 335; v. 371.] When Johnson met the historian in Edinburgh, he praised him to Bozzy for his caution in "not exposing himself by argument to his own superior opinions "; and when the divine ventured at Boswell's lodging to discuss some point, Johnson chuckled to his friend that he had "downed upon him." Yet the dogmatist, whose conceit in his own powers Boswell fanned with his adulation, meant to be pleasant to the Principal all the while.

The work on Charles V. had brought the historian in touch with the Spanish main, with the conquerors of the New World, and he now chose as his subject for study the discovery and conquest of America. Information that was original could not be found in Edinburgh or in London, and there were few Spanish authorities to consult; though the Ambassador at Madrid helped him with books and papers, of which he made admirable use. The *History of America* was published in 1777. [The reading of this History suggested to Keats his well-known lines in his sonnet on Chapman's *Homer* on "Stout Cortez,"

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"silent on a peak in Darien."] His clear, vigorous, and often picturesque narration, his shrewd grasp of facts, made the work worthy of his reputation. This was the last of his eminent historical works, although in 1783 he began a continuation with an account of the American colonies, which he stopped when the revolt of the States made the interest in these provinces more political than literary. [His last work, *Dissertation on India*, counts for nothing as literature.]

In estimating the worth of historical productions of former generations, we are apt to show authors scant justice. Later investigations bring old documents to view, fresh facts come to light to - modify our opinions, rendering obsolete what seemed a pretty piece of immortality. And yet the work itself, from a literary point of view, may remain admirable. To such reverses Gibbon alone seems superior: the assaults of criticism cannot prevail against him. There stands his work on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire - the marvellous history of centuries, the record of the strife of diverse races and rival creeds which were unconsciously forming out of barbaric chaos a new civilisation on the ruins of the old - the author marshalling multitudinous facts in splendid array, searching out the elements of social forces with admirable insight, and producing a work whose accuracy stands unassailable, leaving future editors only the humble task of putting a diffident footnote to correct a date or amend a reference. Such is the triumph of only one historian - of the plump and placid author who, in his study at Lausanne, plans out his works so evenly, tapping his snuff-box and putting a pinch to his nose, as he reads over with special zest some particular passage of subtle irony or majestic pomp.

Robertson had no such genius, "master artist" though Gibbon kindly called him, and he achieved no such glory. The treasures of Simancas were not open to him, state papers of Spain were unknown to him, and much that he wrote is necessarily superseded to-day. One sees him as a philosophical historian in his introduction to Charles V. - a survey of European history which shows him at his best. The style seems pompous and stilted to us now, for it belongs to a formal age of cocked hats, knee-breeches, and bag-wigs. Possessed of a profound sense of the Majesty of History, the author approaches her in court costume, and addresses her with profound ceremony. The reflections may be too obvious, and the phrases too high-sounding, for though Robertson recommended *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* as the best of models for narrative style, one finds, unluckily, more of Dr. Johnson than Dean Swift in his pages. "Sir," said Johnson, in a pleasant humour one day to Bozzy, "if Robertson's style be faulty, he owes it to me;

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that is, having too many words, and those big ones." [Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (Hill's ed.); Mackintosh's *Memoirs*, ii. 110.] Sir James Mackintosh, who speaks of the style as having a demureness of manner, primness, and, stiffness like the politeness of an old maid standing on formalities of propriety, read a volume through to give a composed dignity to his style in his address to a Grand Jury.

It was in 1780, when only fifty-nine years old, that Principal Robertson retired from his leadership of the Church, abandoning public life, as his hero Charles V. abdicated his throne. His last appearance was consistent in its liberal policy, and its caution with his whole career. Scotsmen were agitated at the proposal to extend to Scotland the Act carried out for England and Ireland, repealing the penal statutes against the Roman Catholics. In 1775 the General Assembly under Robertson carried a motion approving of this measure of justice; but soon the people were in a furore - civil, social, religious bodies agitated against it. The Corporation of Cordiners in Potterrow, the porters of Edinburgh, journeymen staymakers, guilds of gardeners, societies of coal-heavers, masons, butchers, and weavers piously joined with town councils and Church courts in opposing the Bill. "No popery" mobs attacked popish chapels, assailed the supporters of the threatened repeal, while soldiery guarded Robertson's house at the College. The Principal felt it prudent to bend before the storm of fanaticism, and when the Assembly met next year, while he avowed his sympathy with the Repeal, he pronounced it unwise to pass laws which would cause general disorder in order to relieve a "handful of Roman Catholics in Scotland," and stated that he had advised the Government to relinquish their Bill. It was not a very heroic ending to a distinguished ecclesiastical career. [Cunningham's *Church History of Scotland*, vol. ii. 543. According to Dr. Carlyle in 1780 the palmy days of the Church were gone - less interest was now shown by the laity, and an inferior class were entering the ministry. "The General Assembly was deserted by the most respectable part of the landlords, in whose place men of an inferior station and narrow and bigotted principles have been allowed to fill that court. A remarkable instance of this was observed in the Assemblies of 1778 and 1779, when the Bill for the Relief of Roman Catholics was the subject which agitated the country to the greatest degree. In neither of which Assemblies were any of the supreme judges present, nor any of the officers of the Crown (being attending their duty in Parliament), nor so much as one landed gentleman worth £300 a year. . . . Through the indifference of the laity and the inattention of Government, the wild party have been gradually gaining ground, while many of the wisest and most experienced of the moderate party have been disgusted with neglect, and have discontinued their attendance in the Supreme Court. Young men of low birth and mean education have discovered that livings may infallibly be obtained by a connection with the most insignificant voter for a member of Parliament, and superior spirits perceiving that the most distinguished among the moderate clergy had not for many years power of recommendation to benefices, have generally taken themselves to other professions." - Carlyle MSS.; see Cockburn's *Memorials*, p. 288, on declension of the clergy.]

His work for the Church was not ended, for he remained prominent as a preacher in Greyfriars' Church, discoursing with vigour, if not with inspiration, on

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fine moral principles and practice - the moderate divine preaching alternately in the pulpit with his evangelical colleague, Dr. John Erskine, a Calvinist whose spirituality took the grimness out of the creed, one of the most gentle of beings, with the blood of a long race of country gentlemen in his veins, and the spirit of stout Covenanters in his heart. These two men, opposed in policy and in teaching, were united by the respect and friendship which draw good men together.

Not the least important part of Robertson's career was his work as a Principal of the University. Great changes had come over the University since, in 1735, he sat in its class-rooms. At that time, amid a number of dull men teaching obsolete science and philosophy, were Colin Maclaurin, in the fulness of his fame, one of the most brilliant disciples of Newton; Sir John Pringle, now President of the Royal Society, then lecturing on moral philosophy, and prelecting on Puffendorf and Grotius; Alexander Monro, the first Professor of Anatomy, attracting students from all quarters. When in 1763 the historian became Principal, only one of the old staff remained - good Dr. John Stevenson, Professor of Logic, of whom all his famous pupils spoke with reverence. Now he was an old man, lingering on in an age which had outgrown his methods, though he bravely abandoned Locke for the new "common-sense" of Reid. When the new Principal was going his rounds to visit the classes, as was then his duty, he entered the shabby little class-room which he had left as a boy. There was the learned veteran, whom every one esteemed, going through the same lectures, doubtless yellow with age, thumb-marked by thirty years' wear and tear. At the close of the lecture Dr. Robertson rose and addressed the students in Latin - which we may trust they understood. He told them how he, too, had as a boy from these benches listened to their venerable teacher, and what gratitude he felt for the stimulus towards literature he himself had gained from his prelections on Aristotle's *Politics* and Longinus. As he spoke tears came to the old man's eyes, and when the class was over he fell on the Principal's neck and kissed him. [Grant's *Hist. of Edin. University*, ii. 330; *Scots Magazine*, 1802.] A touching scene worth remembering! Men of a new school and new generation were now teaching in that shabby college building - Adam Ferguson on moral philosophy, Blair on rhetoric, Matthew Stewart on mathematics, Cullen and John Gregory on physic, Joseph Black on chemistry, and Alexander Monro *secundus*, as brilliant as his father, on anatomy. The fame for ability which the university had acquired had drawn students from England who formerly would have gone to Utrecht or Groningen or Paris. Noblemen were eager to entrust the care and education of their sons to Scots professors, who were as eager to get them to increase their meagre salaries. The

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students had increased from 300 at the beginning of the century to 600 about 1770. The staff of eight regents had enlarged to eighteen professors. But though classes, scholars, and teachers had vastly grown in numbers, there was the same deplorable accommodation in the wretched collection of buildings - two half-formed quadrangles of shabby edifices, which had in olden days been dwelling-houses, with the addition of low dark class-rooms and a few chambers for students who had long since deserted them, making squalid way for some printers, tradesmen, and wash-women. After weary years of effort, it was the joy of Dr. Robertson's heart in 1789 to see the foundation-stone laid of a university worthier of a great seat of learning than those miserable buildings, which he bitterly said were "more fit for almshouses," on which he for years had gazed with sad eyes from his study windows. He did not live to see the work completed, and, from lack of funds, the splendid design of Adam was never fully carried out. After thirty years of appealing and begging, £32,000 were collected; but when he died, there were still standing parts of old dilapidated buildings side by side with portions of the new edifice which were unfinished and going to ruin, in which crows built their nests undisturbed, while beggars set up their huts unchallenged at the college gate. [Grant's *Old and New Edinburgh*, ii. 23.]

Time went by, and the year before his death Dr. Robertson removed from the paltry Principal's house in the College, with its mean surroundings, to Grange House, a mile from town, with its gardens enclosed by high walls, in which the old man loved to walk, inspecting his flowers and his fruit. When visitors came they found in him a model of serenity and dignified kindness. He was deaf and required an ear-trumpet, but this infirmity was not too great a trial for a man who loved more to talk than to listen. Lord Cockburn remembered when a boy visiting the venerable historian [*Memorials*, p. 48.] - a pleasant-looking old man, with an eye of great vivacity and intelligence, a projecting chin, a small ear-trumpet fastened by a black ribbon to the button-hole of his coat, a large wig powdered and curled. "He struck us boys over the wide table as evidently fond of a good dinner, at which he eat with his chin near his plate, intent upon the real business of the occasion. This appearance, however, must have been produced partly by his deafness, because when his eye told him that there was something interesting, it was delightful to observe the animation with which he instantly applied his trumpet, and when he caught up the scent he followed it up and was the leader of the pack." Devotedly loved by his family, his nature was genial and kindly to his friends. "His home for three weeks before his death was really an anticipation of heaven," says Carlyle. Almost to the

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last he was full of his little interests, with tottering frame superintending his gardener; placid, even gay, on his death-bed. [Stewart's *Works*, x. p. 198; Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 549.] After a life of almost unbroken prosperity, he died on the 4th of June 1793. He had reached the age of seventy-one - an age, however, which was almost juvenile when so many of his contemporaries bore lightly their weight of years till they were past eighty.

If men lived long in those days, they were fortunate in the fact that their fame and works did not die before them. Yet time in the end plays cruel havoc with literary reputations and "classics." Books that once no gentleman's library could do without, become books that no gentleman's library can do with, and standard works at last lie like their authors prone in the dust. It is not surprising that even Robertson should to some extent share the fate of his fellows. More researches, fresh discoveries, make good works obsolete; as new lights come, old lights grow dim, and once-esteemed books retreat to upper shelves, respected by all who do not know them. It may happen sometimes that visitors at a country house where new books are scanty will read old volumes when the rain is pelting or the snow is falling, to while the hours away, and at dinner they may remark, with the air of discoverers, that they have been looking over Robertson's *History*, and "it is really very well written." But follow these volumes from the library to the sale-room; see them, as we have so often done, put up in handsome sets of fourteen volumes octavo, "bound in full tree calf, gilt extra." After a few half-hearted bids they are knocked down for one shilling a volume - "not a fifth of the price of the binding," mutters in querulous aside the auctioneer, who at least knows the value of the exterior.

Yet, if Dr. Robertson's works have fallen into disuse, he has not fallen into disrepute as a writer. Unfortunately, the sole consolation for eminent but superannuated authors such as he, is that they have instructed and pleased the age in which they lived, that they form stages in the evolution of literature, that on stepping-stones of their dead selves successors rise to higher things. Whether defunct writers, great in their day, would have considered this a sufficient consolation for being ignored by posterity is quite another question.