

The Classical Review

FEBRUARY 1911

OBITUARY

MR. S. H. BUTCHER.

THE death of Mr. S. H. Butcher is lamented by the public with a sense of personal loss, and has raised among men of letters, and specially in the spheres of classical learning and education, a dismay and consternation, to which something has contributed beyond the admiration due to a singularly brilliant, harmonious, and beneficent career, and to a legacy of writings, not indeed very large, but all of high quality and, in part at any rate, of great and permanent value. We lose a living type and representation, such as is not and cannot be often seen, of that humanity, that sweet and noble facility of social and intellectual intercourse, which the study of letters should produce or promote. We suffer the eclipse of an ideal. And the loss is especially sensible at a time when everywhere, and not least in this country, the due adjustment of relations between the literary basis and the other elements of culture is matter of debate and difficulty, temporary as we may hope and believe, but pressing and perhaps perilous. Many will echo the significant terms of one among the valedictory notices, which, with the 'Praeses Academiae' joins not only the 'lucidissimus expositor litterarum' but also the 'fortissimus defensor.'

Nothing indeed could be less proper to the moment, or, we may add, less congenial to the spirit and teaching of Mr. Butcher, than to exploit him for
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the purpose of a controversy. Nor is there any need. Whatever our shades of opinion, we shall not deny, no likely or conceivable reader of this Journal will deny, that Greek language and literature, by direct and indirect influence, have been and still are powerful, as factors, in promoting a certain delicacy, propriety, grace, and subtle simplicity in the pre-eminently human faculty of speech, and a large appreciation of the value of this faculty in individual and national life, and a high sense of patriotic obligation to diffuse these advantages as far as possible; or that in all these, the use, the appreciation, and the duty, Henry Butcher was an excellent example; or that from Greek books and thought he drew the main part of his inspiration, and without them would not, and probably could not, have been what he was.

What he was, all that he was, no one, whatever may have been his opportunities of observation, may pretend to put into words. That not even the spoken word, and still less the written, can contain the man, is a lesson, most useful to bookmen, upon which Butcher himself insists. And if a man is not to be circumscribed by his own words, still less can he be defined by another. Each will see what he can.

One trait is certain, and most important, his extraordinary faculty of speech,—not oratory, but speech for daily and general purposes. He spoke

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English with a delicacy and ease, a pleasantness in the sound, an unforced precision in the choice of expressions, a rapidity of adaptation to turns of thought and conversation, changes in situation, circumstances, temper, and company, and generally with a complete command, to which one could hardly find a parallel. Whether, or in what degree, he was to be called eloquent, I could hardly say; he was far above the average in that way; but the faculty to which I refer has little to do with eloquence as now practised and understood. Nor do I mean exactly what is commonly imported by the term 'a good talker,' though that he was. I mean, in the simplest sense, that he spoke well, so well that it was a delight to hear and to follow him. He had one advantage, which might be commoner than it is,—he appreciated the difficulty of English. He has some remarks, humorously distressful, upon the unmanageable qualities of the language as applied to writing, and the strange insensibility of many Englishmen to disharmonies and improprieties, whether in books or in speech. He makes comparisons in this respect, especially with Greek and the Greeks, which prove, if anyone were likely to doubt it, that his own sharpness and subtlety of sense had been partly acquired by close and sympathetic study of English in its relations to remote and contrasted idioms. How far, or whether at all, he consciously studied vocal practice as such, I do not know. Consciously or not, he did in fact, I am sure, constantly apply pains to the perfection of speech in its simplest use as a daily instrument. This accomplishment, guided by a warm and generous disposition, a genuine interest in all sorts and conditions of men, and a deep desire to promote intercourse of thought as a humane thing and a good in itself, was one principal element, at all events, in that personal charm, to which so many and such striking testimonies have been recently given. The art—for an art it was in the best sense—was aided by a graciousness of countenance and person, for which beauty must be the word, though the thing was not just that, but better. With

other management, in a man less lofty in his conceptions of private and public duty, all this might have been turned to mere purposes of self-gratification or predominance. Butcher, without the least pedantry or pretension, made of it a boon and lesson to circles ever increasing. Nothing, not even his unsparing industry or his courtesy in all relations, was of greater public benefit, or contributed more to make him the leader and centre that he became.

He had an exquisite sense of humour, and a keen observation of personal distinctions in speech and thought. His conversation, though it moved generally and by preference (as would appear if one came to look back on a whole interview) upon large and important themes, was full of entertaining illustrations from real experience. It seemed to me—I see not how else to put it—that whatever were the subject of conversation, interesting and amusing things, relating to that subject, had always occurred, and recently, within the observation of Butcher. His strokes and pictures were without malice; he had a toleration very uncommon in a man of strong and firm opinions, a fighting man; his disapprobations were mostly conveyed with a sort of seemingly simple irony, the full effect of which depended so largely on the voice that the written words must lose most or all. But even his writings, those especially which were composed for oral delivery, have some touches of the kind. These touches may not be much in themselves, not important doubtless to the solid value of the works. But nowhere is more to be found, now, of the quality which enabled Butcher to do what he did. Here is an instance from the finale of the *Harvard Lectures* (p. 264):

A literary aesthete was described by Lucian as 'a strange phantom fed upon dew or ambrosia.' Him too we know. His house is not upon the solid earth. He sings and soars, he loves and laments, he knows not what or why; harmonious and meaningless is his song. The cult of the meaningless is from time to time in the ascendant. Once at an exhibition of pictures I stood in wonder before a certain portrait. I begged a friend who was initiated into the principles of the school to explain it. The reply was: 'Think away the head and the face, and you have a residuum of pure colour.' Whether this doctrine is to be accepted in painting, and

more particularly in portrait-painting, I do not know; but in literature at least it means sure decay.

The tone here is more than commonly sharp, and would have been less so, with gain of power, in talk; but the turns of the last clauses are very characteristic and apt. In the following reference, half grave and half playful, to Plato, there are touches of the same kind, which may be thought even better:

The homoeopathic cure of morbid 'enthusiasm' by means of music was, it may be incidentally observed, known also to Plato. In a passage of the *Laws*, where he is laying down rules for the management of infants, his advice is that infants should be kept in perpetual motion, and live as if they were always tossing at sea. He proceeds to compare the principle on which religious ecstasy is cured by a strain of impassioned music, with the method of nurses, who lull their babies to sleep not by silence but by singing, not by holding them quiet but by rocking them in their arms. Fear, he thinks, is in each case the emotion that has to be subdued—a fear caused by something that has gone wrong within. In each case the method of cure is the same; an external agitation (*κίνησις*) is employed to calm and counteract an internal. But Plato recognised the principle only as it applied to music and to the useful art of nursing. Aristotle, with his generalising faculty and his love of discovering unity in different domains of life, extended the principle to tragedy, and hints at even a wider application of it. . . .

One must not mar this finished bit of writing by any indication of emphasis, and even comment would be dangerous. But for all that, to recite it well is not easy; and few there were who had not something to learn as well as to enjoy in hearing such passages delivered by the author, or better still in hearing him talk, as he would, in a style differing from this by a still more efficient simplicity and a still subtler ease, upon anything, you may say, to which you chose to lead him. Those hundreds in number, or it may be thousands, who knew and loved his voice, have only to recall and mentally to apply it. When that memory fails, something of it, one may hope, may still survive in the text.

It would be most false, of course, to give or leave the impression, that jesting, or light thought of any kind, was the main, or even a very important, element in Butcher's speech or work. A certain

playfulness was seldom banished, never willingly; and, as he was a sure source of enjoyment, so he intensely enjoyed other men and the human world. But in substance he was *σπουδαῖος*, earnest, elevated, a seeker of great things, and a worker in large fields. I do not think, though I may judge wrong, that even in youth his high spirit would have been well described by the word 'gay.' Certainly not so his later moods; and in that part of his thoughts, to which he chose to give the permanence of publication, the main strand of the cord is always serious. His style has two main types, the expository manner which prevails in the treatise on the *Poetics*,¹ and another more original and, in appearance, more spontaneous, which belongs naturally to the two volumes of addresses, the *Harvard Lectures* and *Some Aspects of the Greek Genius*. As a contribution to learning, the treatise on Aristotle is of course far the weightier; but the others deserve not less well to be read, and, for myself, reperusal deepens the sense of their value as well as their charm. They have most of the author. A unity, much more than may at first appear, runs through all. For a choice of specimens, we might take two contiguous essays, *The Melancholy of the Greeks* and *The Written and the Spoken Word*.² To the second I have already indirectly alluded; it contains the base and starting-point of Butcher's thought and teaching. The first, which is also a beautiful composition, and, especially in regard to Pindar and Herodotus, a penetrating piece of criticism, ends upon this note:

In the modern world the contradiction between boundless aspiration and limited powers is apt to paralyse high effort. In classical Greek antiquity the sense of man's feebleness heightens his energy of will. The impression left on us is altogether unique in character, and, as a result, the pathetic in Greek poetry is often not far removed from the sublime. 'There is nothing, methinks, more piteous than a man, of all things that creep and breathe upon this earth.' These words were uttered by Zeus in the *Iliad*, and the thought is typically Hellenic. But no less Hellenic is the rousing call of Sarpedon to Glaucus: 'Ah, friend, if once escaped from this battle we were for ever to be

¹ *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*.

² *Some Aspects*, etc., p. 131.

ageless and immortal, neither would I fight myself in the foremost ranks, nor would I send thee into the war that giveth men renown, but now, . . . , now let us go forward, whether we shall give glory to other men, or others to us.' The dark destiny of man is here the very motive which prompts to heroism. The thought is the same as that of Pindar: 'Forasmuch as men must die, wherefore should one sit vainly in the dark through a dull and nameless age, and without lot in noble deeds?'

One half of life, says Butcher elsewhere, Greece has made her domain—all, or wellnigh all, that belongs to the present order of things and to the visible world. Hellenism was not his religion, but it was a material portion of it.

British patriotism—if we give to the epithet its largest and most liberal extension—was another part. For the State in its true idea, as it might and should be, he had a deep reverence, often expressed in a favourite quotation from Burke, whom of all English authors he seems to have best known and most loved:

The State is a partnership in all science, in all art, in every virtue, and in all perfection.

As a spiritual organism, the sum, and something more, of social contacts, interchanges, affections between the minds and hearts of the members, he prized the larger unity highly. But he was profoundly sensible of the difficulties which beset the preservation of this character in the huge modern type: how easily the State, regarded as a machine for security, a protective shell, may become a cause or excuse for making life, in the individual, the family, and the city, narrower, feebler, less spiritual and associative. He knew, and strove against, the special danger of the English temper in this respect—our tendency to self-isolation, our little care for a truly humane *ὀμιλία*. At the ceremony of his funeral, as I recalled his words and work in this aspect, I felt a new and peculiar application of the stern warning cited by the Apostle from the Greek poet: 'Be not deceived—

φθείρουσιν ἤθη χρῆσθ' ὀμιλίας κακάς.

His life, though he had his full share of tragic sorrows, was in the main happy as well as prosperous; and it had the

unity, the organic development, which in all things he desired and sought.

He was an Irishman by both parents, with a strain of English blood; his character has been justly described as a happy blend of the two sources. His father, Samuel Butcher, late Bishop of Meath, was Professor of Ecclesiastical History in Trinity College, Dublin, when Samuel Henry was born (April 16th, 1850). He was educated chiefly in England—at Marlborough under Dr. Bradley from 1864, and at Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1869 to 1873, in which year he was Senior Classic. In 1874 he was elected a Fellow of Trinity College, where he resided and taught until the vacation of his fellowship, in 1876, by his marriage. Dr. Bradley, his head-master at Marlborough, had in the meantime become Master of University College, Oxford. Appointed to a tutorial fellowship at that College, Butcher removed to Oxford, and worked there, with great success, until 1882, when he obtained the important post of Greek Professor in the University of Edinburgh. This he held for twenty-one years. Mrs. Butcher died in 1902, and in the following year Butcher resigned his professorship and removed to London. Before this he had achieved a very great reputation, not only in the ordinary professional work of a writer and teacher, but also in all kinds of social and public business connected with the higher education. In particular, he had taken a leading part, not only in the government of the University of Edinburgh, but also, as a Commissioner and otherwise, in the reform of the Scottish Universities under the Act of 1889, as he afterwards did in the foundation of the new University of Ireland. He had also gained an immense acquaintance and personal touch with things, classes, and men concerned, directly or indirectly, in the academic system or systems of the country. Such a man, resident in London and nominally without occupation, was of course overwhelmed with calls for work, to which he responded only too zealously, in such enterprises as the Hellenic Society and the British School at Athens, the foundation of the British Academy (of

which he was an original member, and in 1909 became President), the Classical Association, and others too numerous to mention. The Classical Association, a society which has already done much service, and may develop into great importance, has owed so much to Butcher that he may almost be said to have created it. In 1906 his influence was extended, and his labours enormously increased, by his election, upon the death of his intimate friend, Sir R. C. Jebb, as Member of Parliament for the University of Cambridge. A better representative it is scarcely possible to conceive, and in none of his functions will his place be more difficult to fill. In 1908 he was appointed a Trustee of the British Museum. Among many academic testimonies of admiration may be mentioned particularly an honorary degree from the University of Harvard, where in 1904 he delivered the course of lectures afterwards published. But no list of honours would adequately represent the range and significance of his work, inspired as it was by that peculiar personal power which put reality and life into all his connexions of thought, feeling, and social effort. 'In the higher education of the country he had, in fact, attained an almost unique position. During the last twenty years few changes of moment have taken place in any British University in which he was not concerned; and few appointments of importance have been made in which he was not consulted. And the reason of this confidence was his remarkable combination of judgment, sympathy, and sincerity.'¹

All this meant overwork. He seemed, however, to bear the strain well, nor—so far as I am aware, and I was in close communication with him—was there any pressing cause for alarm before his return, in last October, from his summer holiday, of which the most part had been spent, as usual, at his house near Killarney. But on October 24th, when he visited Cambridge, and stayed with me, for the last time, to perform one of his incessant public engagements, it was plain, though he was all himself, that he was not ready for a new spell of

work. A few days later came the fatal collapse. He died in London on December 29th, 1910.

It hardly belongs to this Review, and certainly not to me, to estimate Butcher's work as a politician, so far as it was not directly connected with education, learning, or literature. He was a Unionist, and active in his party, though, like most reasonable politicians, he might with propriety be called both Liberal and Conservative. Yet he was Conservative in the main, and by temper and conviction an 'aristocrat' in this sense—that, though he keenly desired and eagerly promoted the diffusion of culture, he was more sensible to the danger of lowering the standard, and of neglecting the most capable and 'best' in order to multiply the number of the 'improved.' A Liberal Democrat will allow that this danger exists, and should be signalled and avoided as far as possible.

Even in practical application of the principle, if we soon come to matters of controversy, there is still room for agreement. Let it be assumed, for instance, that the retention or extension of 'Greek' may be purchased at too high a price: it is still desirable to know what the influence of Greek is, what it can do, and what would be lost with it. On these points Butcher is an excellent teacher, the best that I know. For instance, he will dissipate the confusion which, under the name of 'classics,' speaks as if Greek and Latin could do the same or the like educational work. Butcher was an exquisite Latinist, wrote the language admirably, and could have discoursed admirably upon Latin literature. But he was aware, and never forgot, that in the qualities of freshness and spontaneity, in the revelation—only to be made once by the nature of the case—of linguistic and literary art in process of first development and as a new discovery, Latin is as far from Greek as it could be. I am not saying what practical consequence should now be drawn from this. I say nothing of Butcher's deductions. But anyhow, we should know and feel the true facts. And nowhere will the English reader find them better set forth than in the writings of Butcher. Omissions there

¹ *The Times*, December 30th, 1910.

are, of course, and perhaps some qualifications to be made, in the fringes of the subject—for instance, when, by implication, he touches on the quality of the ‘modern languages.’ He may not have done justice, in particular, to the language and literature of France. But what he says positively, on the main theme, is the essential truth; and, like all his thought, it lives.

In connexion with his politics, since one of the most noted and most remembered of his utterances in Parliament was a strong speech against the political enfranchisement of women, it will be well to note, that he worked zealously for the inclusion of women in higher education, and did services to this cause, at Oxford, at Edinburgh, and elsewhere, which have been conspicuously and gratefully acknowledged.

As a contributor to learning, he will probably be measured mainly and eventually by the book *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. The prose-translation of the *Odyssey*, of which he was joint-author, is indeed more widely known, has great value both from the learned and from the popular point of view, and will not soon, if ever, be superseded. The collected essays and addresses have at present much importance; they may hold a permanent place, or they may not: *habent sua fata libelli*. If anything else of the kind, not published, remains, it is to be hoped that the question of publication will be considered, of course under the strict respect due to the wishes, if ascertainable, of the author. The text of Demosthenes, which he partly completed, is a work of great labour and will be mentioned with gratitude. He knew and loved Demosthenes as few now do; and, could he have spent his time twice, could he have done more than fill it with useful work, he might have added to this text, and to the booklet *Demosthenes* of 1881, expository work on the Greek orators for which no hand so fit is likely to be found. But among what

he has done, the treatise on the *Poetics*, as a contribution to learning, stands pre-eminent. Butcher was here thoroughly in his element. It will be noted, in the book *Some Aspects of Greek Thought*, how naturally the lines of reflexion run up to the final part—a discussion of the Aristotelian *Poetics* which partly anticipates the complete treatise. It was a gain too, or certainly no disadvantage, that opinion on the *Poetics* is, or was, in a state urgently demanding correction. No book, as Butcher humorously remarks about a certain famous sentence in it, has been more cited, discussed, and explained ‘by men who knew Greek, and by men who knew no Greek.’ He was compelled here to dissent often from respectable and persistent tradition; and it was not on the side of such dissent that he was likely to exceed or to err. His corrections are many, subtle, invaluable, and the book, indispensable to students of the subject, will commend his name to times not in touch with his practical work.

For the present, that practical work, and the man himself, are the gifts that most move our thanks. Few men have better served their generation, and of scholars perhaps not any.

At the end of so fine a piece, when we are dismissed, as from a *Samson Agonistes*, ‘with new acquit of true experience,’ grief, private grief, must not be importunate. But a word, a word of gratitude, will perhaps be indulged to a friendship of forty-two years. I saw Henry Butcher for the first time at Marlborough, early in the year ’69, and shortly before we were together elected to scholarships at Cambridge. I was taken to Marlborough by my father mainly for the purpose of making his acquaintance. From that time till now we have been often together, and always in close mental touch. He has been a chief factor in my life. Among the multitude of mourners not many have more cause.

A. W. VERRALL.