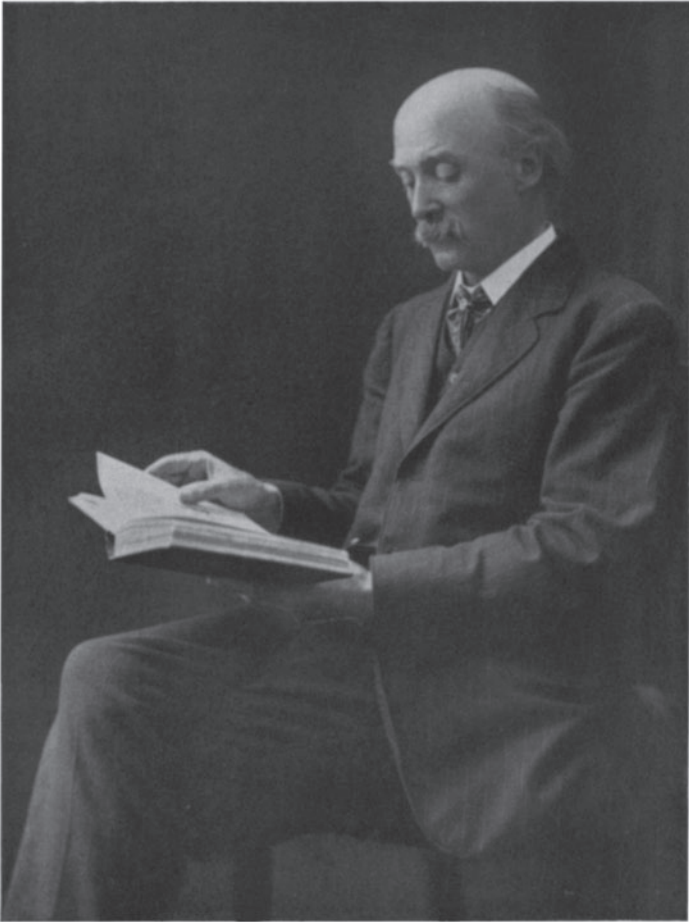


Cambridge University Press
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by

ARTHUR PLATT

With a Preface by

A. E. HOUSMAN

**CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS**

1927

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316601693

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First published 1927
First paperback edition 2015

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-316-60169-3 Paperback

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P R E F A C E

THE author of the papers collected in this volume was one whose published writings, though they show the rare quality of his mind, do not portray the range of his studies and the variety of his accomplishments. Nor do these papers themselves complete the picture; but they have been recovered and put together that the world may know a little more of an uncommonly gifted man who was not much before its eye, and whose reputation was highest within the narrower circle which knew him well enough to admire him rightly.

It is not certain that he would have consented to their publication, for he must have felt that they bear some traces of the circumstances which called them forth. University College London, like many other colleges, is the abode of a Minotaur. This monster does not devour youths and maidens: it consists of them, and it preys for choice on the Professors within its reach. It is called a Literary Society, and in hopes of deserving the name it exacts a periodical tribute from those whom it supposes to be literate. Studious men who might be settling *Hoti's* business and properly basing *Oun* are expected to provide amusing discourses on subjects of which they have no official knowledge and upon which they may not be entitled even to open their mouths. Platt, whose temper made him accessible, whose pen ran easily, and whose mind was richly stored, paid more of this blackmail than most of his colleagues, and grudged it less; but the fact is not to be con-

cealed that these unconstrained and even exuberant essays were written to order. The only one which he allowed to be printed, and that only in a college magazine, is *Aristophanes*. Two however have a different origin and were composed with more deliberation. *Science and Arts among the Ancients* is an address delivered before the Faculties of Arts and Science in University College on a ceremonial occasion, the opening of the Session in October 1899; and the Pre-lection is one of those read in public by the candidates for the Cambridge Chair of Greek when it fell vacant in 1921.

John Arthur, eldest of the fourteen children of Thomas Francis Platt, was born in London on the 11th of July 1860 and died at Bournemouth on the 16th of March 1925. He was sent to school at Harrow, whence he went up to Cambridge in 1879, winning a scholarship at Trinity College. In the first part of the Classical Tripos of 1882 he was placed in the second division of the first class, a position which may have disappointed himself but did not surprise those friends who, whenever they went into his rooms, had found him deep in books which had no bearing on the examination. In the second part a year later he obtained a first class in Literature and Criticism and also in Ancient Philosophy. In 1884, like his father and grandfather before him, he was elected a Fellow of Trinity. This Fellowship he lost under the old statutes by his marriage in 1885 with Mildred Barham, daughter of Sir Edward Bond, K.C.B., sometime Librarian of the British Museum, and granddaughter of R. H. Barham, the author of the *Ingoldsby Legends*. Their children were one son and one daughter. For the next eight years he taught at the coaching establishment of

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Wren and Gurney in Bayswater; in 1894 he was chosen to succeed his friend William Wyse as Professor of Greek in University College London, and soon after took up his residence about a mile away on the edge of Regent's Park. He held his Professorship more than 30 years. In 1921, when Henry Jackson died, he was persuaded to become a candidate for the Chair of Greek at Cambridge, to which few or none of the competitors had a juster claim; but he was relieved when he was not elected, and it is certain that Cambridge would have been less to his taste than London as a place to live in. He would have vacated his office at University College by reason of age in July 1925, but in 1924 he was attacked by illness, and did not live to complete his term.

At the time of his appointment some feared that they were yoking a racehorse to the plough and that his duties might be irksome to him because they could hardly be interesting. Much of the teaching which he was required to give was elementary, and he seldom had pupils who possessed a native aptitude for classical studies or intended to pursue them far. But he proved assiduous, patient, and effective: only an oaf could help learning from him and liking him; and with his best students he formed enduring ties, and would inveigle them into reading Dante or Cervantes with him at his house of an evening after they had taken their degrees. Outside his own class-room he was a centre and fount of the general life of the College, most of all in the Musical Society and among his colleagues in the smoking-room after luncheon. Nearer to his house he made another circle of friends. He was a Fellow of the Zoological Society, frequented its Gardens, and inspired

a romantic passion in their resident population. There was a leopard which at Platt's approach would almost ooze through the bars of its cage to establish contact with the beloved object; the gnu, if it saw him on the opposite side of its broad enclosure, would walk all the way across to have its forelock pulled; and a credible witness reports the following scene.

I remember going to the giraffe-house and seeing a crowd of children watching a man who had removed his hat while the giraffe, its neck stretched to the fullest capacity, was rubbing its head backwards and forwards upon the bald crown. When the object of this somewhat embarrassing affection turned his head, Platt's features were revealed.

In youth he had poetical ambitions, and his first book was a volume of verse; a smaller one on a personal theme was printed privately, and so was a collection, made after his death, of sonnets, very personal indeed, with which he had entertained and striven to ameliorate his colleagues. He early produced recensions of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, in which it was his aim to restore, so far as might be, the original language of the poet or poets, and thus to pursue further that special line of Homeric study which began with Bentley and his digamma, engaged the acute but undisciplined minds of Payne Knight and Brandreth, and has left as memorials of its progress the editions of Bekker and of Nauck. Nothing could be more different, or could better display his versatility, than his other chief work, the translation of Aristotle's *De generatione animalium* with its multifarious notes on matters zoological. A slighter performance was a free rendering of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus into the prose of King James's Bible.

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Among the Greek scholars of his country Platt belonged to that company of explorers whose leading figures, after the universal genius of Bentley, are Dawes, Porson, and Elmsley. Minute and refined observation for the ascertainment of grammatical and metrical usage was his chosen province; and his early investigations of Homeric practice were his most characteristic work, and probably surpass in value his later and more various contributions to interpretation and textual criticism. Metrical science, upon the death of Elmsley, had deserted its native isle and taken flight to the Continent: Platt was one of the very few Englishmen who in the last hundred years have advanced the study, and among those few he was the foremost. In conjectural emendation, like Dawes and Elmsley, he was shrewd and dexterous enough, but not, like Bentley and Porson, eminent. In literary comment he did not expatiate, although, or rather because, he was the most lettered scholar of his time. He stuck to business, as a scholar should, and preferred, as a man of letters will, the dry to the watery. He knew better than to conceive himself that rarest of all the great works of God, a literary critic; but such remarks on literature as he did let fall were very different stuff from the usual flummery of the cobbler who is ambitious to go beyond his last.

If his contemporaries rated him, both comparatively and absolutely, below his true position in the world of learning, the loss was chiefly theirs, but the blame was partly his. He had much of the boy in his composition, and something even of the schoolboy. His conversation in mixed company was apt to be flighty, and his writing, though it was not so, carried jauntiness of manner to some

little excess. Those who judge weight by heaviness were perplexed and deceived by a colloquial gaiety, much less unseemly indeed than the frolic sallies of Dawes, but striking more sharply on the sense because not draped like them in the Latin toga; and it was disturbing to meet with a scholar who carried his levity, where others carry their gravity, on the surface, and was austere, where he might without offence or detection have been frivolous, in conducting the operations of his mind.

That he wrote little was the direct and natural consequence of his extraordinary capacity and the variety of his interests and attainments. He would rather improve himself than instruct others. He wrote on subjects where he could make definite and original contributions to the advancement of learning: otherwise he preferred to read. Greek was his trade, but the home in which he dwelt was great literature, whether its language were Greek, Latin, English, French, Italian, Spanish, German, or Persian. The best authors were his study, but his reading ran far beyond them; his curiosity invaded holes and corners, and his taste ranged from the *Divine Comedy* to *Jorrocks's Jaunts*. He followed his inclinations and read for his own delight, with a keen and natural relish, not a dutiful and obedient admiration of the things which are admired by the wise and good. Nor were his studies warped and narrowed by ambition. A scholar who means to build himself a monument must spend much of his life in acquiring knowledge which for its own sake is not worth having and in reading books which do not in themselves deserve to be read; *at illa iacent multa et praeclara relictæ*.

Music was a rival of literature in his affections, and his

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knowledge of the art and its history was almost an expert's. He followed with interest and understanding the progress of discovery in the natural sciences, and his acquaintance with zoology in particular was such as few laymen can boast. In conclusion it is proper to mention his vices. He was addicted to tobacco and indifferent to wine, and he would squander long summer days on watching the game of cricket.

His happy and useful life is over, and now begins the steady encroachment of oblivion, as those who remember him are in their turn summoned away. This record will not preserve, perhaps none could preserve, more than an indistinct and lifeless image of the friend who is lost to us: good, kind, bright, unselfish, and as honest as the day; versatile without shallowness, accomplished without ostentation, a treasury of hidden knowledge which only accident brought to light, but which accident brought to light perpetually, and which astonished us so often that astonishment lost its nature and we should have wondered more if wonders had failed. Yet what most eludes description is not the excellence of his gifts but the singularity of his essential being, his utter unlikeness to any other creature in the world.

A. E. HOUSMAN

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