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HONEST RELIGION

By

JOHN OMAN
D.D., F.B.A.

With an Introduction by
FRANK H. BALLARD, M.A.
and a Memoir of the Author by
GEORGE ALEXANDER, M.A.
and
H. H. FARMER, D.D.

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INTRODUCTION

BY FRANK H. BALLARD, M.A.

It was not Dr Oman's habit to be over careful for the future, but there was one thing impressed upon the minds of the members of his family, that no papers of his were to be published after his death. This book is, however, an obvious exception to the general ban. On the day he so suddenly and unexpectedly put down his pen and drew his last breath the manuscript was found on his desk actually packed and addressed to the Press. There were reasons, into which I need not now enter, why the work was not immediately published. Nothing has been lost by delay, for while there is much in the book that is pertinent to our present troubles, like all that my father-in-law wrote, it deals with abiding realities and will have its place whatever the shape of things to come may be.

Dr Oman more than once remarked to me that in a sense he had worked backwards. He began, in *Vision and Authority*, with an enquiry into the foundations on which all Churches rest. He was concerned with the Church, its authority, its creed and its organisation. He passed to what he believed to be the ultimate problem of the last two centuries, the relation of *Faith and Freedom*, "the problem of how Faith is to be absolute and Freedom absolute, yet both one". He returned to the first question in *The Church and the Divine Order*, confessing, however, that he was attempting

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no mere essay in ecclesiastical polity but a contribution to the problem whether our society is to rest on individual competition or legal socialism. In *Grace and Personality*, which is perhaps his profoundest and most original book, he developed ideas already stated in *Vision and Authority* and came to grips with ultimate theological problems. This was a war book in the sense that it was written when the nations were locked in mortal combat. Oman was by no means remote from the conflict. He was much amongst the troops, especially amongst the wounded, always ready to talk about the things that were troubling men's minds. There is, however, little of the shadow of war upon the pages in which we see "religion shining in its own light". The book was written in the conviction that "greater than all political securities for peace would be a Christian valuation of men and means, souls and things". At length came *The Natural and the Supernatural*, which some have regarded as his *magnum opus*, and which will probably rank as one of the greatest contributions to constructive apologetics this age has produced.

In none of these learned works was Oman out of touch with actual life. But he left much to be inferred—more than most of us could manage. Now and again—in, for example, *The War and its Issues*, *The Paradox of the World*, and *Concerning the Ministry*—he dealt with the practical difficulties of a work-a-day world, but he still left the impression that the whole body of teaching needed the kind of application he could do supremely well. This book goes far to make that application. It may not be as profound as *Grace*

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and Personality or as academic as *The Natural and the Supernatural*, but it is full of ripe wisdom and mature religious faith. All Oman's distinctive teaching is here, but perhaps more than in any other publication (with the single exception of the book on the Christian ministry) the man himself appears with his large knowledge of life and his sympathy with the troubles of the human heart.

Oman was scrupulously careful in the preparation of his books. He hated shoddy work and did his best to make each page accurate. We have tried, as time and ability have permitted, to respect his standards. Here and there we pondered sentences he might have rewritten, but beyond obvious verbal alterations making for clearness we have left the original untouched. Our work was greatly lightened by the very careful way in which the Press revision had been done. A word ought to be said about Scriptural quotations. The renderings do not always conform to any translation known to us, but so often the essential meaning of the passage is made clear and arresting that we decided to leave them unchanged. An interesting instance is the use of the expressive word "cheeped" in the rendering of Isaiah x. 14 on page 60.

The book, which is largely based on various addresses given in Cambridge, was read in MS by two of Dr Oman's oldest friends, the Rev. B. R. Mein and Mr George Alexander, and the latter has given me every assistance in putting it through the press. Oman and Alexander were fellow-students in Edinburgh and the friendship then formed never waned. Never, I imagine, was a major decision made in the life of either

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without the knowledge of the other. Readers of Oman's books will know how often he was indebted to his friend for help in reading manuscripts and proofs. They will be glad to read the brief memoir Mr Alexander has been persuaded to write for this volume.

It would not have been my father-in-law's wish that much should be said about him, but it was felt that something ought to be written about his contribution to theology and his place in the life of Cambridge. This has been contributed by his old student and successor at Westminster College, Dr H. H. Farmer.

The Index has been prepared by another old student, who became a son-in-law, the Rev. Frank McConnell, M.A., of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

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MEMOIR OF THE AUTHOR

I

BY GEORGE ALEXANDER, M.A.

Dr Oman, when discussing “Awareness and Apprehension” in his great work, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, describes how, as a small boy, standing by himself at the edge of the open sea, after being at church and hearing the difference between good and evil expressed “under the material forms of heaven and hell”, the idea first came to him that he was alone, resulting in “a consciousness of myself which set me thinking, yet not about myself”.¹ The whole passage is interesting, but enough has been quoted to show at how early an age Oman’s environment stirred his reflective mind, destined as it developed to mark him out as “a man by himself”, and foreshadowed a career which no one who knew him in his twenties could have forecast, least of all anyone familiar with the religious and ecclesiastical atmosphere of England and Scotland, even fifty years ago. No one else can well appreciate how, among many unexpected turns in Oman’s career, the most unlikely was that the dreamy, shy youth who addressed fellow-students of his own Church with such diffidence, and at whom we were apt to smile, until we found he was always worth listening to, should have come to speak with confidence and authority to

¹ P. 136f.

men of all Churches, less in Scotland than in England, where lines are more sharply drawn, and have found himself so much at home in Cambridge with its academic life contrasting so strongly with that in which he was trained.

I may have run ahead, but it seemed worth while noting at the outset what, to all who knew him, was the outstanding feature of a career, in the critical years of which great thinking strove with limitations of oral expression, in circumstances where the value of the latter could not be despised and, so far as his chosen profession was concerned, narrowly escaped defeat.

John Wood Oman was born in July 1860, the second son of a family of four sons and two daughters, of whom since his death only one daughter survives. He was born in Orkney on the farm of Biggins, in the parish of Stenness (of Standing Stones fame) which ancestors had owned for hundreds of years, of which he himself was owner in turn and which is now in the possession of his eldest daughter, Mrs Ballard. His father, like so many Orcadians, had gone to sea in his youth and sailed for many years as captain, latterly of the mail steamer to Orkney. To his memory, Oman dedicated the Kerr Lectures, *The Problem of Faith and Freedom*, describing him as “a Scholar only of Life and Action, but my best Teacher”. Did space permit, one might enlarge on what for an enquiring mind, to which, as Dr F. R. Tennant in the appreciative notice he contributed to the *Proceedings of the British Academy* remarked “a problem was a provocation”, is the abundance of interest to be found within the narrow limits of the island home. Suffice it to say that, though he

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had not left home for his earlier education, the main part of which he owed to a tutor engaged for a neighbouring family and shared by a few other boys, it was possibly another proof of his individuality that he entered Edinburgh University at the age of seventeen with a well-stored mind, with anything but an insular intellectual outlook and more important still, with his native gift of original thought unimpaired.

Brought up in the United Presbyterian Church (now part of the Church of Scotland but in those days an active and uncompromising opponent of the latter as then constituted) Oman had decided to enter its ministry. The training involved an Arts' Course of normally four years, followed by three years in the Church's Theological College. It was the day of a uniform course for the M.A. degree without any of the options now permitted, to relieve the student of subjects less congenial to him and allow a certain amount of specialism. The examinations were taken in three departments—Classical, Mathematical and Philosophical. The last included papers in Logic and Metaphysics, Moral Philosophy and English Literature. Having taken a distinguished place in the classes (numbering from 150 to 200 students) required for the ordinary degree, Oman attended the advanced classes and graduated in 1882 with first class Honours in Philosophy. He also gained the Gray and Rhind Scholarships which were open to graduates of the University. The next three years were spent in taking the full theological course of his Church's College and, as the classes were recognized by the University for the degree of B.D. he added that to the Arts degree and a few years later the newly instituted D.Phil.

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How the connexion began I do not know, but at that time students of the United Presbyterian College who wished to attend a German University for a summer term mostly found their way to Erlangen, and in the summer of 1883 Oman was one of three friends there, the others being Mr James Gardner, of whose early death he always spoke with deep feeling, and Mr B. R. Mein, ever one of his closest friends. He attended the lectures of Frank, Zahn and Class and perhaps owed his interest in Church Architecture to Hauck. The Theological "Verein" welcomed the Scottish students to guest membership and contributed not a little to the educational value of the term. Heidelberg claimed him for the summer of 1885 and there the chief attractions in the theological curriculum appear to have been Hausrath (New Testament Introduction) and Merx (Psalms) and he added lectures by Bartsch on German literature and Kuno Fischer on Faust. In his new surroundings his humour had full play and, from letters to his home, he enjoyed the summer. In August he went on to Neuchâtel, recommended to him for its climate and "being on a lake". There he spent nearly three months and gained a facility in French which, with his German, stood him in good stead when in later years he addressed Continental Churches.

After his return from Neuchâtel he was licensed by his Presbytery and put himself on the List of Probationers of the United Presbyterian Church with a view to obtaining a charge. That Church had its own method of filling vacancies so far as Probationers were concerned. A small Committee allocated vacancies among the Probationers who had no choice in the

matter. After that, an appointment lay between the man himself and the congregation to which he, with the others assigned to it, had preached on two Sundays. The system was ideal in theory but, depending too much on pulpit gifts, failed, as Dr James Brown in the *Life of a Scottish Probationer* stated, to give “the same opportunity for men of high culture, who lack to some extent the power of effective utterance, attaining a position where their gifts can be used for the good of the Church”.¹ The words were written years before Oman went to be assistant to Dr Brown, but he was already experiencing their truth. For a few months he took charge of a “preaching station” at Makerstoun, a few miles from Kelso, where he renewed association with a former minister of his in Stromness, Mr Kirkwood. As, however, he had to live in Kelso, and, as a rule, walk to and from Makerstoun for his services, he was not sorry to accept the Assistantship in St James’s Church, Paisley, of which Dr Brown, to whom I have already referred, was minister. He was one of the leading men in the Church, a man of great charm, and he had a large and attached congregation. In Oman he found a man after his own heart and Oman always looked back happily on his time in Paisley.

During these months he preached in a number of vacant churches in Scotland, but his lack of what is known as a “good delivery” did not make up for the oft recognized quality of his sermons. Was it perhaps another evidence of his unusual personality that an older friend, himself a popular preacher, remarked that

¹ Pp. 82ff. give an excellent description of the system and incidentally of a Probationer’s experiences in Orkney.

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he had never known anyone make such a clean division in congregations as Oman? The members were decided in their preference or their opposition, none seemed merely indifferent. The feeling of his friends that any congregation which did call him and have time to know him better would soon appreciate his worth was justified when towards the end of 1889 he was settled in Alnwick as colleague and successor to Mr Limont, who had been minister of the Clayport Church of the Presbyterian Church of England for many years, succeeding Dr John Ker, in his day a well-known preacher in Scotland and one who for pathos is singled out by Oman as one of six preachers he commended to his students.¹

Dr Brown, though far from well, insisted on going to Alnwick to introduce Oman, to whom it was a lasting regret that a cold caught, on that visit, accentuated the illness which some months later carried off one of his best friends of an older generation. As may be supposed, Oman found himself in very different surroundings from those in which he had expected to serve, but he was already of ripe experience and his natural interest in all sorts and conditions of men made his new life easy to him.

It was a special pleasure to him that one of the members of the Northumberland Presbytery assembled to ordain him was Mr B. R. Mein (then settled in Thropton), who had accompanied him to Erlangen. It helped him greatly to have his old friend so near and to have his guidance while yet a stranger to the Presbytery, to both its members and its ways of work-

¹ *Concerning the Ministry*, p. 142.

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ing. Though no ecclesiastic, it was not in him to take vows lightly and one soon heard of the place he was taking in the work of the Presbytery, and his desire to support weaker charges.

But his congregation was his first care, and if it was not long before he began his literary work, that brought no neglect of his people and there is evidence that they came to be proud of the wider notice he was gaining. He must have had their leave to give three courses of lectures, one at, I think, Auburn University, in the United States, followed by the offer of a Chair, one the Kerr Lectures, that appointment formerly in the hands of his old Church, the United Presbyterian, being then in the gift of the United Free Church, and the third being at Westminster College itself.

To Alnwick days also, Oman owed his first acquaintance with Miss Blair, daughter of Mr Hunter Blair, J.P. of Gosforth, which led to his marriage in 1897. Oman used to tell against himself that he took as the opening of the first service on returning from the honeymoon, the 67th Psalm beginning, "Lord bless and pity us". Pity, however, was the last term to apply to their union and Mrs Oman was able in the succeeding years in Alnwick not only to prove her capacity in the home and in the church work but to be the mentor which the rather absent-minded ways of her husband at times needed.

As the years passed four daughters were born and to those who saw him with his children in their earliest years, the stress he lays on the child mind in his writings is perhaps unconscious autobiography. He moved from Alnwick in 1907 to Cambridge on his

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appointment as Professor of Theology in Westminster College, and his congregation left Mrs Oman and himself in no doubt that the ties forged between members and minister would, as he hoped, be enduring.

The main part of the Cambridge life, I leave gladly to Professor Farmer, one of several former students Oman lived to see occupying Chairs. There are, however, one or two points of a more personal nature which may be worth recording without disloyalty to the memory of a friend to whom I have owed so much.

Oman had adapted himself in Alnwick to a Church life very different from that which he would have found in a Scottish town of the same size. He now, as I have already said, faced in the residential system of Cambridge an academic life, poles apart from that of Edinburgh in his day. The University admitted him, as other Westminster Professors not already Cambridge graduates, to its privileges by conferring the honorary degree of M.A., and he became a member of Queens' College and later on an honorary Fellow of Jesus. It was not long before he was on friendly relations not only with theological scholars of all Churches and views but with men eminent in other fields of knowledge. Of the many amenities, however, of the new position, he valued none more than the closer relationship between Professor and student, possible in a residential College. To be with him on a Sunday and find his students dropping in for tea or a smoke was to realize a relationship a classroom by itself could never give. And it was here, if I may say so, that Mrs Oman came into her kingdom. Her interest in the men was natural and unaffected. They could talk to her freely

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and her memory was of the order to call forth some kindly recollection of a student years after, if his name cropped up. To her Oman dedicated his volume of sermons, *The Paradox of the World*, and than ΣΟΪ, ΓΝΗΣΙΑ ΣΥΖΥΓΕ no three words he ever penned, albeit a quotation, conveyed a greater wealth of meaning or more of himself.

The war of 1914–1918 brought an interruption of the College life but none to Oman's activities. The months spent in Birmingham with a small number of students, maintaining the services of vacant churches, visitation of military hospitals and the spell of work in France for the Y.M.C.A. still left time for expanding an address on the war he had given at Queens' and publishing it as *The War and its Issues*—a book, had he lived, he might well have re-issued in the light of this war.

He paid two visits to Germany after the last war. During the occupation of the Rhineland, one of the Societies for improving international relations asked him to accompany two Swedish representatives to visit the prisons in which Germans were confined, and make a report which, I think, was private. It happened to be the time of inflation and his humour found outlet in the millions of marks he paid for a meal while his sympathy went out to the distress of the poorer people. The second visit was at the end of 1935 when he gave a paper to a meeting of the Student Christian Movement in Berlin. The paper was read for him by Mr Mackie, but he answered questions and took part in the discussions for two hours in German. Amongst others he met Niemöller, and on his return, at the request of

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Dr John Hutton, he contributed his impressions to the *British Weekly*.

In 1931 he was called by his Church to the Moderatorship of its General Assembly and gave a notable address on Creeds with special reference to the Westminster Confession. During his Principalship both Oxford University and his own University, Edinburgh, conferred on him the honorary degree of D.D.

He had succeeded Dr Skinner as Principal of Westminster College in 1922, and when he himself retired in 1935 Mrs Oman and he at first thought of making a new home elsewhere, but after looking round for a year Cambridge drew them back. There was no sign of impending tragedy and every prospect of a pleasant retirement among old friends. No sooner, however, had Mrs Oman put the new house in order than she was struck down by what proved to be a fatal illness and she passed away just before Christmas, 1936. Oman never really recovered from the blow. A weariness crept into his life, though he was always ready to speak of his good fortune in the loyalty and devotion of his daughters, and his younger sister had now made her home with him. He found distraction in work, including work on this book. But when in July 1938 he was offered the Fellowship of the British Academy, though he appreciated the honour he hesitated at first to accept, as he felt no longer able to do anything more "to support the honour". In 1938 also, by appointment of the British Academy, one of his oldest friends, Professor A. C. Welch of Edinburgh, gave the Schweich Lectures on Biblical Archaeology. Only reasons of health prevented Oman from being present.

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For some time it had been known that he was suffering from weakness of the heart and a more serious attack had confined him to bed in May 1939. He was not thought to be in any immediate danger but he passed away with startling suddenness on the 18th. When a few days later he was laid to rest, the assemblage in the Presbyterian Church of Cambridge was a remarkable tribute to the position Oman had gained and to the wide range of scholarship and interests with which he had been associated.

There was in Oman's life much of the unexpected but no one can deny that "the deep things of God" were his first interest and that he had the highest ideal of his calling. Had he permitted, much could be added of his influence not only on students but among brother ministers. It cannot be said that he never had to face opposition and somehow he often gave a false impression of himself. But beneath the dreamy appearance there was a practical mind as well as a knowledge of human nature ready with sympathy or rebuke as occasion required. His friendship once given was never withdrawn: differences there might be, but at the worst there could be agreement to differ. In nothing did his foresight prove more accurate than his attitude to the war now upon us. We may be glad that he was spared what the Church of England Prayer Book, never with more aptness, calls "the miseries of this sinful world". He described in his book on the last war what he regarded as an ideal peace: may we hope that when the new peace comes it may be as Christian as the ideals for which we fight.

II

BY REV. PROFESSOR H. H. FARMER, D.D.

Looking back now on Oman's work in Cambridge as theologian, teacher, and trainer of men for the Christian ministry, it is possible to discern more clearly something which was increasingly felt as the years of his life passed. This was the unity and consistency which pervaded all that he was and said and did, a unity and consistency the more remarkable and impressive because of the unusual power and range of his mind and its interests. There was a massive integrity in Oman which comprehended within itself as much the small change of his everyday personal contacts as his deepest researches as a theologian and philosopher. This always in the end made itself felt for any who had more than a merely superficial contact with him, and was undoubtedly one source of his deep influence on his students, even on those, of whom there were usually some, who found his teaching and writing difficult, even at times incomprehensible. The meaning might baffle them, but there was no mistaking the unitary weight and stature of the man behind and within the teaching and all his personal dealings with them.

The secret of this massive unity is at once easy and difficult to state. Underlying his integrity in the sense of "wholeness" there was a remarkable integrity in the sense of "sincerity". Yet, and here is the difficulty, "sincerity" in its ordinary usage is a poor, thin word to indicate what is meant. To quote some words I have

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used elsewhere, “in Oman sincerity was a broad, steady, powerful, open-eyed, confident, mature—every adjective is necessary—intention to grasp and be grasped by the truth over the whole range of experience and knowledge, no matter how it presents itself”. That truth is not truth for you until you see it for yourself, that it will assuredly be given you if, and only if, you seek it with all your powers—these basic themes of his teaching found impressive embodiment in himself. There was none of his students who did not feel somewhat daunted by his superlative equipment of knowledge and insight, but there was none also who did not feel the inspiring rebuke which daily met them in one who so plainly scorned, not in word merely, but in his whole person, the “unlit lamp and ungirt loin”. Some were wont to think of him as a somewhat formidable person; others wondered sometimes whether he understood the difficulties of the not too bright student; others, again, thought him somewhat intolerant of views with which he did not agree. No doubt he had the defect of his quality. But the quality was such that when once it was felt the defect counted for little. Indeed in this instance the defect was perhaps not altogether a disadvantage. It was good, perhaps, that Oman’s challenge to sincerity was such that one could always, if one were foolish enough, take shelter under a complaining desire for more tender treatment.

Yet Oman’s austerity had a deep, if reserved, sympathy at its heart, as many of his students have learnt from experience, and the only thing he really required of the not too bright student was that he should use such powers as he had to their fullest pitch.

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The intolerance, moreover, which he seemed to display towards views with which he disagreed was certainly sometimes due, not to the fact that he disagreed, but to the fact that he sensed in them an underlying insincerity, a thinking *à parti pris* which to him was not thinking at all. Nor was he any other than a humble man. There is no sincerity without humility, as there is no humility without reverence and faith. It was because Oman's sincerity was integrally bound up with his reverence for God, and his understanding of His purpose in the world, that he was able to send forth many students deeply changed by their sojourn at Westminster College. He gave to many of them a new vision of God, of life's true meaning and use, of the ministerial calling, which has stood the test even of these grim times. His continuous insistence, for example, on the difference between mere solemnity in religion and worship and true reverence, or again, on the difference between a preacher who respects his hearers because he reveres God's purpose with them as persons and a preacher who merely seeks to manipulate them by popular artifice, was not only salutary for his students, but was in fact a clue to his whole religious and theological outlook.

Here again the unity of his mind and character discloses itself. For Oman's theology might well be described as the theology of "reverence, freedom, and sincerity". We could indeed describe it as the theology of God's personal dealings with men, but that would convey little. All Christian theologies must maintain, at least verbally, that God values and deals with men as persons. What distinguishes Oman is the profound

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consistency with which this is wrought out into every department of religious experience and theological reflection under the guidance of the three categories already referred to—reverence, freedom, and sincerity. In what is perhaps his greatest work, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, man's capacity to apprehend the sacred and to respond (or not to respond) to it in reverent obedience is made the clue to the nature and history of religion, and through this to the understanding of human personality, of evolution, of history, of man's place in and apprehension of the natural order, the whole constituting a mighty argument to justify the contention that to know the reality of the supernatural environment, the prime requisite, as in other spheres, is to be willing to respond to it and to live in its midst with sincerity of mind. In *Grace and Personality* the same basic position is worked out in relation to the doctrine of grace and reconciliation with a thoroughness, originality and spiritual power which makes the book, to use Dr Tennant's words concerning it, "one of the major treasures of theological literature". In his other books the same basic theme is applied to other central issues: in *Vision and Authority*, to the problem of authority; in *The Church and the Divine Order*, to the doctrine of the Church; in *The Problem of Faith and Freedom in the Last Two Centuries*, to a critical review of movements of thought from Pascal to Ritschl.

Oman's magnitude as a profound scholar and original thinker was, it is hardly necessary to say, fully recognized in the University of Cambridge. He was thrice appointed to the Stanton Lectureship in the Philosophy of Religion and for many years served on

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the Board of the Faculty of Divinity and on its Degree Committee. He was frequently called on to advise university students reading the philosophy of religion, and through these activities, as through his lectures and books, he came to be one of the main influences in the study of the philosophy of religion in Cambridge. The following has been written by one of the Professors in the University:

On the Faculty Board, though not himself directly concerned with the details of University routine and administration, Oman's learning and wide range of scholarship, and his deep interest in education as something much greater than mere instruction, gave great weight to his opinion on all questions that concerned the policy of the Faculty. His service to the Degree Committee was especially notable, and it was far from being confined to opinions on works in the Philosophy of Religion. His shrewdness and humour, and his dislike of sham or pretentious work could make him a severe critic where severity was deserved; but his judgment was always generous in its recognition of good work and of promise, especially in the young student. His knowledge of men and things, his great powers of observation, and that direct and profound acquaintance with simple and unsophisticated things, which was one of his outstanding characteristics, gave sureness and originality to all his judgments, and enabled him always to penetrate to the heart of the matter. Members of the Faculty who learned from his wisdom and enjoyed his friendship cherish their memory of him as among the most original minds that have contributed to theological studies in recent times.

The same writer, referring to a remarkable autobiographical passage in Oman's review of the English