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978-1-107-62645-4 - Letters and Diaries of A. F. R. Wollaston

Selected and Edited by Mary Wollaston

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OF
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A. F. R. WOLLASTON

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MARY WOLLASTON

With a preface by

SIR HENRY NEWBOLT

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1933

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To

GEORGINA, NICHOLAS & JOANNA

May these Letters and Diaries help to preserve
your father's memory, and give a closer and more
personal picture of his life and character than can
be found elsewhere

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PREFACE

A well-planned and well-written book can seldom need an introduction by another hand, but perhaps a book of memoirs may be one of the exceptions to this rule. It is natural to hope that a personal narrative may gain in vividness or in roundness if a touch or two can be added by a second observer, a friend who has stood outside the group of characters portrayed, but in continuous and intimate touch with some of them. It was this hope which moved me to accept the task when it was laid upon me.

My knowledge of Sandy Wollaston dates from long ago—he was the second son in my housemaster's family at Clifton, and was born about a year before I entered the School. My real memory of him may be said to begin in 1881, when I was leaving for Oxford and he was a fair intellectual boy of six, persevering at his violin and bright in conversation—though he was not so free of speech in the dining room, where I generally saw him, as he was on the staircase where he loved to lead a toboggan train, and in the upper part of the house, from which his voice would come ringing in masterful tones. His quiet studious side was I thought well represented by the portrait painted by Miss Mary Tohill, but my own imagination brings back to me an aspect which is even more characteristic—a large-eyed aquiline look and high forehead, as of a young eaglet barely fledged, but already bold and observant. Beyond this I remember little of him as a boy—I was going away into a wider world, and he was just 'one of the young Woolly Bears'.

But 'housefeeling' is in the most favourable cases a form of near kinship, and as time passed I found myself more, and not less, interested in the Wollaston family. During the next eight or ten years I was constantly revisiting Clifton, and whether it was in term or out of term the house in College

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Road was still as in old days overflowing with music and conversation and hospitality. The Wollastons lived a full life, based on the service of a great school, but with windows looking out on a far wider horizon. Mrs Wollaston was a Richmond, an accomplished hostess, a pungently witty talker, the friend of many distinguished people and the critic of many more. George Wollaston himself was a Master on the Modern Side: in school—where I was never under him—he taught science and languages, but every day and at all hours in his own rooms he was giving us a course in history, literature, internationalism and the art of travel. By his drawings, his familiarity with languages, customs and scenery, his specimens of odd minerals, we got to know of his habit of solitary tramping in foreign parts and his delight in their inhabitants; but it was chiefly the birds, beasts and butterflies which attracted him, and the physical aspect of the countries in which they lived. I have more than once made an attempt to draw the outline of this singular and powerful figure in my school life, and I cannot here go further with it. My present point is to mark the nature of the inheritance which came by birth to his son. Sandy was in short the descendant on one side of a clan devoted to music and the arts, and on the other of a family which had been known in the world of science for some two hundred years. He was above all a born wanderer and explorer, and possessed many of the qualities which are invaluable for comradeship or for leadership in out-of-the-way places: two of these were his love of climbing, and his practical knowledge of medicine. This last gave him in a curious way both his first start in life and his second: he qualified as M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. and thereupon discovered that ‘medical practice as a means of livelihood does not attract me—in fact I dislike it all extremely’. But no doubt he found himself doubly useful in his first collecting journeys—in the Sudan in 1901 and in the Far East in 1904—and so transformed his ‘practice’ into a career.

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The pages of this book present his life as one of kaleidoscopic variety—there is simply no room in the volume for the number of maps which would be needed to illustrate his travels satisfactorily.

His friends rejoiced in his successes but to the nearest of them his repeated disappearances and long periods of absence were a continual regret. We were proud of him, and had an unlimited belief in his power of pulling through: but when he wrote or came home in person we felt as though he belonged to a fourth dimension which we could not know, even when he yielded to our urgent requests and wrote about his travels.

From the beginning he had a patient conviction that he could not write anything good enough for the reading of the public, and it pleases me to believe that that conviction was first undermined by the publication of his letter to me in 1906, describing Lake Naivasha, which he visited on the way up from Mombasa to Nairobi. It conveyed so convincingly the beauty of the place and his own peculiar delight in it, that I ventured to send it on my own account to my friend J. A. Spender, who at once printed it in the *Westminster Gazette*. I was amused long afterwards to find that Sandy had himself shared our opinion of its merits: he says on February 26, 1906 (page 85 of this book) that ‘I wrote rather a jolly thing about Naivasha as I was walking along the road from Entebbe’. Then apparently it ‘stuck fast’ for a time, but in the end led him on again to the publication in 1908 of his first book *From Ruwenzori to the Congo*. This gave an excellent account of a modern scientific expedition, a group of comrades intent not only on collecting all possible evidence of the fauna and flora of a region hitherto unknown to the scientific world, but also bent upon the survey of mountains not yet accurately mapped or measured. The impression left upon the reader’s mind is one of a fellowship working in conditions of great physical health and almost ceaseless effort and enjoyment. When I

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re-read it after the War I realised that those who go upon one of these scientific expeditions are in reality entering for an international competition of a new kind, one in which the competitors have none but peaceful and unacquisitive intentions: in which the success of one is in a sense the success of all, and the national rivalry, the desire to be first at the goal, calls forth a helpful rather than a hostile feeling. The story of the Ruwenzori climbing race between Sandy Wollaston and the distinguished Italian climber—the Duke of the Abruzzi—is a tale of chivalry and courtesy throughout: and though the peak named ‘Wollaston’ is a few feet lower than the Italian summit, it gives the loftier reason for national pride and remembrance, as those will realize who read our man’s candid and sympathetic account of the race. Another example of this new kind of Olympic Games will be found in Wollaston’s *Pygmies and Papuans* published four years later, after his return from his first visit to New Guinea. This book is, for me, even more interesting than the Ruwenzori volume—it touches the imagination as even a brilliant work of art could scarcely do. The Papuans when Wollaston visited them had no knowledge of the use of bronze or iron—they were at the stage when men had perfected the use of stone, wood, and bone for implements, when they had begun to cultivate crops for food, and to keep domestic animals. They belonged in fact to the Later Stone Age, the Age of Neolithic Man. Six or eight thousand years ago our own ancestors in Europe were Neolithic men: in looking therefore at the Papuans Sandy and his companions realized that they had outdone all their predecessors—they were looking at the daily life of their own race with all its common acts and contrivances in a period so remote that we have and can have no written record of it. They saw it not as a picture or a scene imagined, but as a real life however ancient—a life which they could share to-day, though separated from it by thousands of years of time. ‘I remember’, the record tells us, ‘seeing him (the stone

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smith of the village) sitting outside his hut sharpening an axe, with three or four others lying beside him waiting to be done, while a few yards away a woman was splitting a log of wood with a stone axe. It struck me as being one of the most primitive scenes I had ever witnessed, really a glimpse of the Stone Age.'

This was the last travel-record which Sandy published, and it is a fine climax. But much work lay before him yet and the story of his second expedition to New Guinea may be read in his diaries included in this book. In the present volume will also be found his answer to many of the questions which his friends would have put to him about his experiences in the War—his long cruises in the *Mantua* and his view of Scapa Flow from the *Agincourt*, his voyage with General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien to the Cape, his success in bringing away the sick and wounded from the Rufiji River, his over-time service in H.M.S. *Humber* at Archangel and in the Dwina River, where fighting went on for months after the Armistice in France; until we reach the entry on October 23, 1919: 'Demobilized to-day—Laus Deo'.

Then follows the Epilogue—the return from War—which to Sandy was always uncongenial—to the old joys of mountaineering, the Everest Expedition of 1921, and in 1923 the visit to the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Colombia. Last of all the home-coming to King's. 'It is a big adventure again, but what has my life been but one adventure after another? and I have been simply dogged by good fortune.'

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My thanks are due to many friends and relations who have kindly allowed me to read through and publish the letters they held from my husband. I am also indebted to those who helped me with the MS. of this book and gave me advice.

To the Royal Geographical Society I am grateful, for their permission to publish some remarks on New Guinea made by my husband at one of the Society's lectures.

MARY WOLLASTON

Cambridge 1933