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G. S. Gordon

Excerpt

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ROBERT BRIDGES

LET me begin by acknowledging the honour which the University of Cambridge has done me in permitting my name to figure among its officers of the year as Sir Robert Rede's Lecturer. Of the life and merits of the founder, about whom, on my appointment, I piously informed myself, I will say only that I found his distinguished career as a Tudor Justice less immediately interesting, and also less innocent, than his membership of what once was Buckingham College, and is now, as I must think, more happily called Magdalene. The notable list of my predecessors in this Lectureship is a more serious matter, and a ground for complacency rather to Cambridge than to me. I come, besides, from another place. But I hope that, where I fail, my theme may save me. For I have chosen to speak of one of the noblest figures of our time, of a poet and man of letters who belonged to England, indeed, but in whom Oxford had a special share, and who honoured me in his last years with his friendship.

The death nine months ago of Robert Bridges, however deeply we may grudge it, coming when it

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did, in his 86th year, in the full glow of a last magnificent accomplishment, must be counted happy. His friends had observed, as the *Testament of Beauty* neared completion, a growing anxiety to reach the end, and make up his account at once with art and nature. Habitual as its speculations had become to him, and easily as it moves in its 'loose Alexandrines', now like a hale old countryman in clouted shoon, now like some pacing patriarch, so sustained a performance must have tried a younger man, and it seems that he feared some sudden failure of strength. As it proved, he not only finished the *Testament*, but lived to revise it, and to enjoy unaffectedly, as indeed he enjoyed everything, the glow of a public approbation so warm and home-felt that even his memory could not have supplied a modern parallel. The barrier of reserve between a nation accustomed to more accommodating officials and a Laureate who was first of all a private gentleman broke down before the conjunction of this unexpected masterpiece and an 85th birthday. One of his chief satisfactions was in the sale of the poem, for he had always wished, and now more than ever, to be read.

It was difficult to believe, on meeting Mr Bridges, so easily did he breathe our biting modern air, that

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he was born in the first decade of the reign of Queen Victoria, and learned his letters in the Laureateship of Wordsworth. He was so frankly and vitally there before you, with such challenge in voice and eye, and in the whole splendid length of him, shaggy-crowned, such lounging and half-arrogant power. Even that atmosphere which lay about him as of some ampler, more leisured, and now vanished age, hardly prepared one for the discovery that he had been familiar as a child with the sight of the Great Duke (a valued memory), and had watched, as a boy of ten, from a Walmer garden, the departure of Napier's fleet for the Baltic under the new power of steam—in those days when first was seen

low and black

Beside the full-rigg'd mast the strange smoke-stack.

There must have been much that he could tell about the great Victorians and their ways, but somehow one did not think to ask him. There was never a man less built for the part of mumbling ancestor. His talk was not of by-gones, but of present, future, or eternal things: his work or yours, what the scientists or psychologists were doing, or the younger poets, what wireless *will* do, or if the sun shone and nature luxuriated, the life of birds and flowers,

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perhaps, or the principles of beauty and rightness in the conduct and the arts of man.

If it was difficult to make a Nestor of Mr Bridges, quite another difficulty awaits the critically minded who cannot know him and have yet to read him. Posterity, it is certain, encountering his last and greatest work, will be puzzled to understand, without much more knowledge than is yet prepared for it, how a man of his generation, however favoured by longevity, should have presented to what is almost the generation of his grandchildren, not only the finest but in many ways the most representative poem of our time. This is already indeed a puzzle to numerous readers of the present day, among them old adherents, contented quoters of his lyrics, who had thought until 1930 that they knew their Bridges.

The answer to such perplexities is biography, by which I mean that history of the spiritual and artistic life which is more especially the biography of poets. It is now a fashion to study intently the youth of great poets, and there is poetical reason for it. It is in those early years that the Delphic stamp is taken. It is now well recognized that in those once *unnoticed* years of youth and childhood—for, in their biographies, our ancestors hastened always to the grown

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man—a poet accumulates by far the greatest and most valuable portion of the natural riches on which he is to draw for life. Bridges himself dwells on this. ‘That children have an innate love of Beauty is undeniable. . . . While the intellectual faculty is still dormant, spiritual things are to children as music is, which a child readily absorbs, without thought, although a full-grown man, if he has lacked that happy initiation, can scarcely by grammar come at the elements.’ In his scheme of life, indeed, as his *Testament* has revealed, he traces the hopes and prospects of mankind to the natural desire, only gradually relaxed and never wholly lost, for what is beautiful and good, which may be seen in the wondering eyes of children, and by Christian symbol, in the face of the young Christ.

The life of Robert Bridges is in neither its inner nor its outer aspects other than very imperfectly known to the present generation. This is the fate, no doubt, of men who outlive their contemporaries, and lead, besides, as Bridges did, an intensely private life. It was a fate, I may add, which he regarded with equanimity. He had hoped, or so I fancy, that he had settled with that, and closed the door on further publicity, when he fused all the thought and art and

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passion of his long life in the *Testament of Beauty*. There was his last confession, his sifted and essential autobiography. The effect of the poem, if I may judge by various signs, has, in fact, been just the contrary. It has brought the world at last acquainted with his life, but in such a manner that it must know more. Had he continued, as once seemed likely, to be regarded and esteemed as in the main a lyric poet, the public, no doubt, would have borne its ignorance with unconcern. But the *Testament* has changed all that; and because it is so plainly the magnificent echo of a splendid nature and the last message of a complete life, the public which has been thumbing the unexpected gospel, looks naturally for elucidation, and above all for a life of the apostle. He himself, I must think unfortunately, took another view. There was to be no official or authorized life: on that he was clear and indeed insistent. Yet somehow, by someone, from material thus necessarily imperfect, it will be done.

It is on the youth of Robert Bridges that most has been revealed to us: much may be gathered from his memoirs of others, and these and similar indications will, no doubt, sometime be faithfully gathered together. In outline the biographical portrait is clear

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enough. He comes before us first as a boy at Eton, and happy there; to the end it is 'the beloved school'; and his Founder's Day Ode is not only the best of Eton Odes, which is saying much, but one of the best of his poems, which is saying more. He was almost *formed*, I should say, at Eton, so well it suited him, and by the time he went to Oxford had taken his mould. Fortune had been kind to him—and seldom through life relented in this benevolence—endowing him with every handsomeness of mind and body, and with the means, moreover, of future leisure. He was athlete, musician, and scholar; had the friends he wished, and had them without effort; and like many serious lads, before and since, believed himself destined for the Church. He passed to Oxford, which shared henceforth with Eton in his institutional affections; read widely and philosophically; was the best stroke of his year; and, wiser than some of his Victorian predecessors in the Laureateship, decided that even a poet should have a profession. His choice was masterly, for, being a poet, he chose science. The rest may be briefly told. After some travel in Egypt, Syria and later in Germany, he went to St Bartholomew's Hospital and became a doctor, practised for ten years, and latterly

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with distinction, and only then, at 38, left the hated town for poetry and a country life. In the 47 years which he had still to live he remained faithful to poetry and a country life. Some twenty of his quiet middle years were spent at Yattendon, where in 1884 he married Monica, daughter of his friend Alfred Waterhouse; the rest of his days at Chilswell, the house he had built on Boar's Hill, near Oxford.

He was in practice no party to that extremity of criticism which demands that poetry shall be read without reference to its authors. There are times for that; but it will always be true, as Bridges himself has said, that 'those who admire or love a poet's work are instinctively drawn to the *man*, and are eager to learn anything that may deepen their intimacy'. In one of those fragments of autobiography which inlay his memoirs of his early friends, he has noted the precise occasion when the attractions of literature first appeared to him. 'I was eleven years of age,' he says, 'in the lower school [at Eton], in the division called Sense, when I first read Ovid, and some elegies of his opened my eyes to Poetry.' Ovid in his time has opened many eyes, but not always to art. It was his command of his medium that won this schoolboy, and Bridges' natural bent for crafts-

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manship, for the *Art of Poetry*, became presently clear. It was brought home to him early by the different attitude of his young friend Dolben, who was a junior in the same House and, like Bridges, a furtive composer. '...we were mutually coy of exposing our secret productions, which were so antipathetically bad.' On the nature of this antipathy Mr Bridges has an important passage. 'Our instinctive attitudes towards poetry', he says, 'were very dissimilar, he regarded it from the emotional, and I from the artistic side; and he was thus of a much intenser poetic temperament than I, for when he began to write poetry he would never have written on any subject that did not deeply move him, nor would he attend to poetry unless it expressed his own emotions... What had led me to poetry was the inexhaustible satisfaction of form, the magic of speech, lying as it seemed to me in the masterly control of the material: it was an art which I hoped to learn. An instinctive rightness was essential, but, given that, I did not suppose that the poet's emotions were in any way better than mine, nor mine than another's: and, though I should not at that time have put it in these words, I think that Dolben imagined poetic form to be the naïve outcome of

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peculiar personal emotion; just as one imagines in nature the universal mind conquering nature by the urgency of life,—as he himself describes it in his “Core”:

Poetry, the hand that wrings
(Bruised albeit at the strings)
Music from the soul of things.

There is a point in art where these two ways merge and unite, but in apprenticeship they are opposite approaches.’

This is a valuable statement and is the proper preface to any account of Mr Bridges’ poetry. Dolben’s assumption that emotional urgency will find or make its own form is the romantic, and also the amateur, view in all the arts, and can only be disproved by failure. Neither on this nor on one other point to which he draws attention did Bridges change. I mean his inability to suppose that the emotions of the poets he read were any better than his own, or his own than another’s. Many years later, in his famous essay on Keats he reaffirms this:

‘There must be thousands and thousands of persons alive at this moment in England, who, if they could only give poetic expression to those mysterious feelings with which they are moved in the presence