

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-66653-5 - The Future of Greek Studies: An Inaugural Lecture

Delivered 6 May 1929

D. S. Robertson

Excerpt

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*The*

## FUTURE OF GREEK STUDIES

THE tradition of the Regius Professorship of Greek in this University stretches back almost to the dawn of Greek studies in England, for Sir John Cheke, its first holder, who “taught Cambridge and King Edward Greek,” was born when Erasmus was lecturing in Queens’.

A Chair so ancient, made illustrious by such scholars as Porson and Dobree, is no easy heritage. A newly elected Professor may be expected in his Inaugural Lecture to state his opinion of the proper functions of his Chair, and to indicate the lines on which he hopes to develop them; and where the Chair is a new or recent creation he may feel himself a pioneer, whose task is to mark out a new path in University studies: but a Greek Professor, especially if he brings, as I do, little

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enough of solid performance in scholarship, must feel it to be his first duty to understand the aims and methods of his predecessors, his first hope not to fall too far short of their achievement.

It is with such feelings that I wish, before saying anything of my own views, to speak briefly of the three scholars who within the limits of my own memory have adorned this Chair, without omitting some of their illustrious contemporaries, no longer living, to whom Fate was not kind.

When I came into residence twenty-five years ago Sir Richard Jebb had already held the Professorship for fifteen years and the greater part of his classical work was done, though his Bacchylides did not appear till 1905. He died in the same year, and to my deep regret I scarcely knew him personally, though I attended with profit two courses of his lectures. Jebb's great achievement in scholarship is a matter of history, which stands in no need of eulogy. It is true that in linguistic analysis, in textual criticism, and in literary interpretation later scholars have

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found much to question, and it is perhaps commoner to-day to hear his work quoted for blame than for praise. But such criticism assumes, or at least ought to assume, that the general distinction and excellence of his work are above question, and, even had he done nothing else, the seven volumes of his Sophocles would remain a solid and splendid monument of learning and judgment, almost unique in modern English scholarship.

In the closing years of Jebb's tenure the prospects of Greek in Cambridge were singularly bright. At the opening of the twentieth century the University was rich in scholars clearly worthy to hold the Regius Professorship. One of the most brilliant, indeed, Robert Alexander Neil, died prematurely in the first year of the century, leaving little tangible record of his vast and humane learning and exquisite scholarship, except his posthumous edition of the *Knights* of Aristophanes. But, despite this great loss, when Jebb himself died four years later, the five candidates who came forward, all residents, were of extraordinary distinction. The cumulative effect of

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the five Praelections which in obedience to the old Statutes they delivered in the Senate House can never be forgotten by anyone who listened to them, and can still be felt by those who study the volume in which they were afterwards published. The following years, however, were disastrous, and though the Electors' choice had fallen on the oldest of the five, Henry Jackson, he long outlived all the rest, except one, William Ridgeway. Three of the younger men, Verrall, Adam, and Headlam, died prematurely within ten years of Jebb.

Of these three I owe personally far the most to Verrall, who was my Director of Studies for the whole of my undergraduate time. When I first saw him he was already crippled by the disease which killed him, but with amazing courage he still showed himself the most enthralling of lecturers and the most sympathetic of personal teachers. He was a man who inspired in all who knew him a feeling of intense personal devotion of which I cannot bring myself to say more in a public lecture.

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Of his published work it is needless to speak to a Cambridge audience. The unsleeping alertness of his mind, the freshness of his observation, the sparkling brilliance of his wit make his books and essays a perpetual joy to read. It cannot, of course, be denied that he was often perverse and fanciful, and that sometimes, as in his treatment of the plot of the *Agamemnon*, he seems to most scholars to have shot very wide of the mark. But his criticism, whether right or wrong, was always stimulating and challenging, and his work on Euripides, whatever its faults of detail, made an epoch in the sympathetic appreciation of fifth-century Greek thought. It is probably difficult for those who knew his books but never heard his lectures or his conversation to believe the truth that his writing, fascinating as it is, is only a pale shadow of his spoken word. The influence of his books and lectures in awakening the minds of generations of students to a new appreciation of Greek poetry can hardly be over-estimated, though this influence, as Headlam felt, had dangerous elements. But on the balance it

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was infinitely more helpful than harmful, and it has left an ineffaceable mark on English scholarship.

From James Adam I had some personal kindness, but I knew him chiefly from his books, and, though I have studied those with keen interest, I do not approach them as an expert, and my admiration of them can only be an echo of the general verdict of more competent critics. In my first year I heard his admirable lectures on Later Greek Philosophy, and I was amazed, as all his hearers must have been, at his power of interesting a very large undergraduate audience in the details even of those schools of thought for which he himself had obviously little admiration. The secret lay, I think, chiefly in that burning enthusiasm for Plato which could always be felt as the background and atmosphere of all that he said and wrote.

The last of these three, Walter Headlam, was by general consent the first Grecian of his generation, a man obviously marked out to enrich the traditions of the Greek Chair. I did not know him as his King's pupils knew

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him, but I had the delight of meeting him once or twice, and I heard the famous lectures on Greek Lyric Metre, of which the substance was afterwards published in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. I shall return to Headlam's work at a later point: for the moment I will only remark that he had conceived the proper approach to the study of classical Greek poetry in so nobly comprehensive a spirit that when he died suddenly in 1908 he had not given the world more than a foretaste of the work which he would certainly have accomplished had he lived. He was still mobilizing in distant theatres many of the forces which would ultimately have converged, with incalculable effect, on his central study of the poetry of Aeschylus. His true greatness has never been fully appreciated outside England.

Henry Jackson, who held the Chair from 1906 till 1921, was far better known to me than either Adam or Headlam, and I owe him many personal debts of which I will not attempt to speak. He has left no written memorial that could make intelligible to a

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later generation the intellectual and moral influence which he exerted for half a century in his College and in the University. That influence is no riddle to those who knew him, for his personality was irresistible. To him the Greek Chair came very late in life, when his best original work was already done, and when he had long been firmly settled in admirable habits of lecturing and class instruction. His appointment by his College as Praelector in Ancient Philosophy had already freed him from the ordinary routine of individual College teaching in Composition and Translation, so that his election to the Professorship made little difference to his activities. He continued to lecture only on philosophical subjects, but all those who knew him were aware of the depth and range of his scholarship: the suggestion, sometimes made, that he lacked interest in other branches of Greek literature was entirely false. Of his original work in Greek philosophy, as of James Adam's, I am not myself competent to speak, but I learnt from the personal experience of his elementary lectures and



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from the talk of his more advanced pupils something of his genius for teaching and of his extraordinary power of holding and inspiring his listeners. No one who knew him could help feeling the width and certainty of his knowledge of Greek language and thought. The accident that I was Secretary of the Classical Board for the years just before his death brought me into frequent contact with him at a time when ill-health was cutting him off from much social intercourse, and I know that, in spite of a fitfully failing memory, the freshness and vigour of his classical interests continued undimmed to the very end of his life.

When Jackson died in 1921, William Ridgeway was the only candidate surviving from 1905, and he was again unsuccessful. Of Ridgeway, as of Verrall, I find it difficult to speak in a public lecture, and I will not attempt any personal appreciation. Everyone who knew him, even slightly, must have felt the presence of one of the most extraordinary and masterful personalities that Cambridge can ever have held: his friends knew also

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how generous, loyal, and lovable was his character, and no death in my recollection has left a more irreplaceable gap. His classical scholarship had obvious faults which sprang, I think, chiefly from his weakness in strict logic: but it had also unique merits, for it was an organic part of an unexampled acquaintance, marvellous in its range and depth, with the cultures, past and present, of the whole human race. His mind surveyed a world of phenomena, and forced them into a vast framework of original classification. Some of that classification was arbitrary and premature, and in detail much of his work is already obsolete: but the width of his knowledge enabled him to set countless facts for the first time in true perspective, and for sheer grandeur of conception his best work still stands unapproached. Yet the mental power which could be felt in his speech was not fully expressed in his writings, and with him, as with Jackson, the intense admiration of his pupils will perhaps never be wholly intelligible to those who did not see and know him.