

OBITUARY NOTICE

Edward Denison Ross, 1871-1940

To sum up the life work of Sir Denison Ross in the brief compass of an obituary notice calls for an unusual effort of compression. Certainly, no British Orientalist of our days was more widely known, both in this country and abroad. But he was a great deal more than an Orientalist. He was a man of special gifts who was called to an important task, and who succeeded in it because of qualities which not only had little to do with Oriental scholarship but to some extent detracted from his reputation as an Orientalist.

Yet he was devoted to scholarship of every sort and in every place, provided only that it was alive. Dry-as-dust pedantry he detested, and in reaction against it he sometimes went to the other extreme. Naturally inclined to wear his learning lightly, he cultivated a playfulness which was frowned upon by the severe and gave rise to not a few misunderstandings. With all that, his range of genuine knowledge was so immense as often to surprise even those who knew him most intimately, and when he threw off his inhibitions his freshness of mind and the zest of his conversation were a perpetual stimulant. He was quick to see through all forms of learned pretentiousness and humbug. Though in everyday matters his judgment was easily swayed, in scholarship he was inflexible. His own weakness was not superficiality, but a difficulty in organizing his knowledge and bringing it to bear systematically on the subject which he had in hand.

Ross's originality and many-sidedness were no doubt nourished in his early *wanderjahre*, which carried him from Lisbon to Samarkand. At one time he spent six months in Florence as an apprentice architect. But his imagination was fired by Turki and Persian, and he sought out all the great masters of those languages. Those whose influence he most often acknowledged in after years were E. J. W. Gibb, Charles Schefer at Paris, Baron Rosen at St. Petersburg,

and Nöldeke (under whom he studied for the Ph.D. of Strasbourg). The fruits of this early period were two works in which the medieval history of Central Asia were vividly portrayed, the translation of the *Ta'rikh-i Rashādi* and the historical synopsis contained in *The Heart of Asia*.

The succeeding years spent in India (1901–1914) added to his repertory of languages—Tibetan being his chief interest at this time—and the tale of his publications. It was during this period too that he acquired the stores of bibliographical information which were afterwards to prove invaluable in building up the library of the School of Oriental Studies, and set on foot the enterprise which most worthily commemorates his work for Oriental education in India, the catalogue of the vast Khuda Bukhsh Library at Bankipore.

After two years in the Print Room at the British Museum, his great opportunity came with his appointment at the end of 1916 to the Directorship of the newly-founded School of Oriental Studies. From the first he was determined to make it a national centre of Orientalist learning, and spared no pains to recruit scholars of international reputation to its staff. In spite of constant financial stringency, in spite of scepticism and cross-currents both in the councils of the University and on his own Governing Body (though he always acknowledged with gratitude the sympathy and help received from many members of both), “Ross’s School”, as it was generally called, was within a very few years furnished with chairs and readerships in all the most important branches of oriental languages and history and with an extensive library. Although he had a natural distaste for administrative duties, he shouldered for many years the whole burden of this organization. He took a personal interest in the studies and difficulties of almost every student, and to them, as to the members of his staff, his door was always open. His tact and humour turned many an awkward corner, and it was mainly due to his deep humanity that the separate departments in the School were welded into a corporate institution.

But all this exacted a heavy toll, and even his freshness and resilience could scarcely have held out had it not been for the relaxation that he found in social life and an occasional fishing holiday. His geniality and broad sympathies, and a wit which seemed to be equally ready in all of the many languages he spoke, made him a familiar and welcome figure in many circles. But his main recreation was to sit down with his books and take up some half-done study or some new problem. Somehow or other he found time to publish a series of Arabic, Persian, and Turki texts and several monographs on subjects related to Persia. Those who criticized the deficiencies of some of his later work forgot that it was done in the rare intervals of an inexpressibly wearing life, when most other men would have been glad to let things slide. Even on his hurried journeys in and across Europe he was always accompanied by two or three notebooks, a Koran, or some other text, to produce in due course an article, always original, and sometimes of far greater importance than its bulk seemed to suggest.

It is no disparagement of the Director's own work, however, to say that his greatest service to scholarship lay in the encouragement and inspiration which he gave without stint to all who came within his range. There must be many, indeed, who, like the present writer, owe to him more than they can ever express. And it was characteristic of him that he was always eager to make scholarship fruitful in the widest sense. It was with this end in view that he established the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, edited the *Treasure House of Eastern Story*, planned with the late Dr. Eileen Power the fascinating series of *Broadway Travellers*, contributed prefaces to countless monographs, and persuaded publishers to accept them, not to speak of many other little-known ways in which he lent his influence to further interest in and knowledge of the peoples and civilizations of the East. To this and to kindred Societies he gave generously of his time and his energies, and in awarding him our Triennial Gold

Medal in 1938, we in this Society showed a just appreciation of his outstanding services to Oriental scholarship.

For so active a man, his retirement from the Directorship of the School in 1937 was a hard wrench, and he found it difficult to settle down to a life of comparative freedom. It was therefore with genuine enthusiasm that he accepted a post in the British Embassy at Istanbul in December, 1939. The death of Lady Ross there in the following spring was a blow from which he never recovered. But perhaps he would have wished no better resting-place than amongst the Turks, whose language and culture had been his first and remained his favourite study.

H. A. R. GIBB.