

**The Rev. Robert Flint** (ob. Nov. 25, 1910, æt. 73).

By Rev. Bruce M'Ewen, D.Phil.

(Read November 6, 1911.)

BOTH for his pre-eminent merit as a theologian and for long and faithful services in this Society a record is here made of the life of Professor Flint. That life was so exclusively, so whole-heartedly, and so successfully devoted to laborious study that little time or energy was left for other interests. Nature had perhaps unfitted him for taking any active part in ecclesiastical or political affairs: he certainly shrank from prominence in academic government, and steadily avoided many public distractions that offered themselves to one in his position; and therefore the fact is all the more notable of his having been a diligent Councillor of the Society for twenty-two years in succession, and a Vice-President during sixteen of them.

The future Professor—almost forty years of his life were passed in University Chairs at St Andrews and Edinburgh—was born of humble parents, near Dumfries, in 1837. Very soon the family removed to Moffat, and later to Glasgow, it so happening that in each place only a wayside school was available for his early education. He entered the University of Glasgow in 1852, and completed his Divinity course with the highest distinction at the age of twenty. While awaiting licence to preach, he served as a lay missionary under the "Elders' Association" of Glasgow—a distracting winter; but out of it sprang a lifelong friendship with the late Dr James A. Campbell of Stracathro. On attaining his majority he became assistant to Norman Macleod, minister of the Barony, and was minister of the East Church of Aberdeen from 1859 to 1861. A call to the quiet country parish of Kilconquhar proved irresistible after his experiences of city life, and there, during the next three years, he laid the foundations of his great teaching fame by a strenuous course of omnivorous reading. Academic recognition of his talents came speedily, and in 1864 he succeeded Professor Ferrier in the Chair of Moral Philosophy and Political Economy at St Andrews, defeating so strong a candidate as the late T. H. Green of Oxford. He was at once recognised as a power in the University; he was wonderfully popular among his students, and a good standing in his class was specially prized. It is remembered of him that he never thought it necessary to barricade his house against the boisterous revelry of Kate Kennedy's Day, and in the troubles that followed the suppression of that

noisy festival he had kept serenely apart from the assertion of authority, losing neither popularity nor dignity thereby. He is reported to have said that neither principle nor want of principle was involved.

The method of teaching adopted in his class was mainly historical, analytical, and critical. Each lecture began with the giving out of a series of "headings," usually about a dozen in number. These were dictated slowly, and formed a complete summary of the subject of the day: then followed the lecture proper, delivered in an even, unpretentious manner, with many naïve provincialisms, and now and then a sly pun or quaint conceit to enliven the presentation. Whether teaching Ethics or Political Economy or Theology, he retained this method to the end of his professorial career, attracting admirers by the bold yet carefully planned exposition of his reasonings, and also by the charm of his strong personality and transparent character, rather than by any arts of rhetoric.

None of Professor Flint's published works reproduce the matter of his St Andrews lectures. Those on Moral Philosophy were highly thought of, giving the judgment on centuries of human speculation by a capable, unprejudiced, and sagacious mind. A short course on Political Economy was considered at the time to be less weighty, and gave no indication of that deeper interest in Sociology which successfully occupied a much later phase of his intellectual activity.

In 1876 he was transferred to the Chair of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh, repeating the experience of Dr Thomas Chalmers, who was his predecessor in both Chairs half a century earlier. His connection with this Society dates from his election as a Fellow in 1880. He took his place at the Council table in November 1883, and was Vice-President of the Society for three periods—from 1886 to 1892, from 1894 to 1899, and finally from 1902 to 1906. On this last occasion he did not complete the normal six years of office. He had already resigned his active work as Professor of Divinity; his home was out of Edinburgh; old friends, and among them Professor Tait, had passed away; and with regret he expressed his desire to be relieved from any further duties on the Royal Society Council.

Professor Flint did his full share of presiding at the meetings, and on two occasions, in 1887 and in 1898, he delivered the opening address from the chair, giving a clear account of the work of the preceding session and a brief obituary of the Fellows whom the Society had lost during the year. In addition to his duty as Vice-President, he attended all the meetings most faithfully, taking part in discussions when these fell within the range of his own special knowledge. Flint and Tait had a great regard, indeed affection, for each other. Both were strong intellectual men, whose opinions

were always clear-cut and reasonable, and both held in a remarkable degree the confidence of their colleagues on the Council Board. In common they possessed the same broad sympathy with all kinds of human knowledge, and each too sought, in a very special way of his own, to combine the theological and the scientific view of the universe.

At home Professor Flint was a student, almost a recluse, spending every available moment in his library. He composed and wrote slowly, and with such deliberate precision that it would be nigh impossible to detect any inconsistency or serious ambiguity in his published pages. His literary output was considerable, ranging over a wide field where accuracy and impartiality can be obtained only by independent and exhaustive inquiry, and yet one somehow never expected Flint to have anything to retract.

The little book, *Christ's Kingdom on Earth* (1865), was intended to form the portico to a much larger edifice (of Biblical Theology) still uncompleted. *The Philosophy of History in France and Germany* (1874) was a fine example of pioneer work in a department little cultivated in this country. Its accurate scholarship and power of independent criticism established the author's reputation on a firm basis. It was translated into French, and led to his election as a Corresponding Member of the Institute of France and as an Honorary Member of the Royal Society of Palermo. This vein of research was continued to some extent in the later volume, *Historical Philosophy in France* (1894); but the results of subsequent labours upon the same subject in Italy and England, though believed to exist in manuscript in a fairly complete form, have not yet been given to the public.

Professor Flint was Baird Lecturer in 1876-77, Stone Lecturer at Princeton, U.S.A., 1880, and Croall Lecturer, 1887-88. The substance of his Baird Lectures was incorporated in the two widely circulated books, *Theism* (1877) and *Anti-Theistic Theories* (1879); while the Croall Lectures, very much expanded, appeared as a systematic treatise on *Agnosticism* (1902). To Blackwood's "Philosophical Classics" he contributed a volume on *Vico* (1884), and to the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* two masterly articles on "Theism" and "Theology." A large work on *Socialism* (1894) was a breaking of new ground, as was also another, *Philosophy as Scientia Scientiarum* (1904); while a variety of occasional papers appeared as *Sermons and Addresses* (1899) and *On Theological, Biblical, and other Subjects* (1905). All are marked by the same thoroughness, clearness of expression, insight, and intellectual grasp. The two Baird Lectures, although of a quasi-popular nature, contain much that was characteristic of the lecturer's own system of theology, and by them he will probably be judged in the future.

As already mentioned, Professor Flint retired from the active duties of University teaching in 1903, and in announcing his intention he had said that his chief motive was to gain more time for writing; but neither health nor years were given him. The delivery of his Gifford Lectures for 1908-9 was eagerly awaited by many who believed that in them he would finally outline a Philosophy of Religion adumbrated for years, and find satisfaction at last for that passion for completeness which delayed this and many another of the Professor's literary projects. But long before the lectures were due bodily weakness suddenly intervened, and all the hopes thus formed were disappointed.

Both in Theology and Philosophy Professor Flint definitely adopted the traditional British or, we may say, Scottish position, and was what would have been called an orthodox man. In Ethics an Intuitionist, in Theology he started from a perfect trust in reason and its powers, and in every argument chose to be dominated by the necessity for purely intellectual conviction, insisting upon it with a vigour that distinguishes him from any contemporary thinker. In justifying this initial trust in reason, he criticised adversely and almost with passion every other avenue that professes to lead to truth. He rejected utterly the prevalent tendency of his own day to take refuge from the agnostic verdict against reason in philosophies of faith or feeling, will or conscience. And yet in all Professor Flint's published works the historical, critical, and controversial elements prevail over the positive establishment of his own conservative position. It was from the Chair of Divinity that he specially devoted himself to the task of vindicating the older methods, which were, in his opinion, being needlessly thrust aside; and it was only in his class lectures, unfortunately as yet unpublished, that his constructive genius found full scope. In them he often sounded the characteristic note of all-comprehensiveness. He conceived the task of Systematic Theology to be to collect materials from every possible source, from Natural Theology and from the other religions of the world as well as from the springs of Christian revelation; he regarded every movement of speculative and scientific thought as combining to clear the ground, and there is no existing treatise on Christian doctrine which takes so wide a view or contains so much supplementary matter. He stood for a strong and vigorous and exacting type of thought, and stood for it almost alone.

Professor Flint held the degrees of Doctor of Divinity and Doctor of Laws from more than one university, and the many honours bestowed upon him both at home and abroad testify to his international reputation. Those who knew himself can but add their testimony to the singular moral dignity, the kindly chivalry, and the absolute sincerity that marked his life.