

OBITUARY

Sir Edward Denison Ross

Edward Denison Ross was born on the 6th June, 1871. His father, Dr. A. J. Ross, was Vicar of St. Philip's, Stepney. From Marlborough the younger Ross went to University College, London. Already he had shown an aptitude for learning languages; but it was at Paris and Strassburg, where he went to study Oriental languages, and in particular Arabic and Persian, that he laid the foundation of a career in which he contributed more perhaps than any other Englishman of his generation to the encouragement of Oriental studies in this country.

From 1896 to 1901 he held the Professorship of Persian at University College; at that time so little regard was paid in London to Oriental languages that the stipend of the Chair was no more than that of Goldsmith's Schoolmaster. To this period belong a number of publications, including *The Early Years of Shah Ismail* and *The Tarikh-i-Rashidi, a History of the Moguls of Central Asia*. A visit to some of the countries described by Mirza Haidar, author of the *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, produced, in collaboration with his fellow-traveller, the late F. H. Skrine, I.C.S., a delightful work, *The Heart of Asia*. *The Life and Times of Omar Khayyam* signalled the beginning of a lifelong interest in that elusive poet.

In 1901 Ross was appointed Principal of the famous Calcutta Madrasah. In 1911 this post was combined with that of Officer in Charge of Records of the Government of India and Assistant Secretary in the Department of Education. A Fellow of Calcutta University and a most active member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, he did not confine himself to Islamic studies but gained some acquaintance with Sanskrit and Chinese and a more profound knowledge of Tibetan. He used the opportunities of his post to edit correspondence with Indian Princes carried on in Persian by Clive, Hastings, and other Governors of Fort William; and he inspired and superintended the cataloguing of the Khuda Baksh Library at Bankipur. At this time, too, were prepared *A Polyglot List of Birds in Turki, Manchu, and Chinese*; *An Arabic History of Gujarat*; *The Poems of the Emperor Babur*; *The Turki and Persian Divans of Bayram Khan*; and *Abu Turab's History of Gujarat*. Perhaps the most noteworthy work he did during this period, although it has not yet seen fruition, arose from his constant desire to procure a fuller measure of collaboration

between Indian and European scholars. When the late Sir Harcourt Butler was Member for Education in the Viceroy's Council, Ross prepared a scheme for setting up an Institute in Calcutta to which it was hoped Orientalists, both young and old, would come from Europe and America to study and teach in collaboration with their Indian colleagues. With the removal of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi this scheme was shelved ; but had it been brought into being it would have furthered not only Oriental scholarship, but also a fuller understanding between East and West. May it yet come and, when it does, may it be associated with the name of Denison Ross.

Made a Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire in 1912, Ross returned to England in 1914 as an Assistant in the Prints and Drawing Department of the British Museum. Here it was fitting that, himself a one-time traveller in Central Asia, he should have had the work of arranging the collections brought back by Sir Aurel Stein. During the Great War Ross's extensive knowledge not only of Oriental but also of several of the less well-known European languages found practical application in the Postal Censorship and the Department of Military Intelligence, for whom he prepared vocabularies in several languages. A country, which with its vast responsibilities in the East had done so little to encourage study of Eastern languages, was fortunate in finding such a one to help it in the time of need. His knighthood in 1918 was a well-deserved recognition of his work both in India and during the war.

But while the War was not yet half-way through its course and the campaigns of 1917 and 1918 had still to be fought, a scheme, long considered and often shelved by successive Governments, at last reached fruition, and London, capital of a mighty Eastern and African Empire, saw for the first time in June, 1916, the foundation within the limits of the City and closely associated with the imperial University a School of Oriental Studies. Although it was not till 1938 that His Majesty in Council approved a change of title to " The School of Oriental and African Studies " the scope of its work had from the beginning included Africa. Even now the undertaking so long overdue was modest enough with an annual grant from the Treasury, after the provision of its building, of only £4,000 ; but the Governing Body set up by the Charter made a wise choice in Ross as its first Director. When twenty-one years later the day of his retirement came, the income of the School, though still far below its needs, had risen to £37,615, the number of its teachers exceeded 100,

of whom 43 held permanent posts, and more than 7,000 students had passed through its doors.

The foundation of the School gave its first Director the opportunity of making London the centre of Oriental and African studies in the Empire, and Ross rose to the greatness of it. Success depended on the assembly of an adequate staff: for this work Ross, with his wide and intimate knowledge of the world of Oriental scholarship and his flair for picking the right man, had peculiar qualification. A small nucleus was found in the holders of a few ill-paid or almost honorary posts in Oriental languages existing in other institutions of the University, which were transferred to the School, but it lay with Ross to find, amidst the overwhelming difficulties of war-time, fit holders of the new posts now created. But the work thus successfully begun did not stop there. The Director's own unquenchable enthusiasm and his power of inspiring others with enthusiasm for their great task made of his staff not a mere collection of individual scholars but a body of men and women united in the determination to spread by teaching and research knowledge of the languages, laws, history, and culture of the Orient and Africa.

As Director of the School Ross had the immediate supervision of its Library and the editorship of the *Bulletin*. The former, now containing over 100,000 volumes, owed both its rapid growth and its acquisition of many treasures to his well-informed judgment and wide knowledge of Eastern books and bibliography; the latter he created as a journal well deserving the high repute it has gained all over the world.

In this way Ross became an ambassador of Empire, and outside the Eastern and African members of the British Commonwealth also he helped to form bonds of scholarship with other lands: in particular his visits to Persia, Turkey, Portugal, and the United States were fruitful of connections, the full value of which still remains to be seen.

On the Continent, where he was always a welcome visitor, he did much to maintain in the troubled years succeeding the War of 1914–18 the one unity, that of scholarship, which still existed among its nations, until even that too was broken by the brutalities of Nazi and Fascist. Then no one threw himself more whole-heartedly into the task of trying to mend the broken lives of scholar victims of dictatorial tyranny who sought refuge in our country.

With the Directorship of the School Ross held also the University Chair of Persian from 1916 to 1937. Under his inspiration many

students were attracted to Persian. In his writings, however, he by no means confined himself to the subject of his Chair. For a varied literary output during this period continued to bear witness to his versatility: *Islam*; *Eastern Art and Literature*; *Tarikh-i-Fakhr ud-Din Mubarakshah*; *The Persians*; *Sir Anthony Sherley*; *Dialogues in the Eastern Turki Dialect*; *Discourse of the Turks by Sir Thomas Sherley*. His efforts for the Persian Art Exhibition, which helped so greatly to its success, produced his popular account of Persian Art. He wrote introductions to many books, and contributed articles to the *Cambridge History of India* and other series and to many learned journals. As a lecturer he was extraordinarily successful, always informative, never dull; and in 1935 the Royal Asiatic Society, which for many years he had served as member of Council, Vice-President, and Director, awarded him its Gold Medal in recognition of his great services to Oriental scholarship.

For a man of Ross's energy retirement in 1938, although postponed for two years beyond the normal age of 65, was bound to be difficult; all the more, on the outbreak of war in September, 1939, he felt the irksomeness of unemployment. His appointment in January, 1940, as head of the British Information Bureau at Istanbul with the rank of Counsellor gave him great joy. For it provided him with the opportunity of once more serving his country, among a people for whom he had always felt much sympathy and with whose late great leader, Kemal Atatürk, he had formed a personal acquaintance. There he died on the 23rd September, 1940, at the age of 69.

In 1904 Ross married Dora, daughter of Mr. W. T. Robinson. It was a happy marriage. Lady Ross was a woman of many parts, a keen wit, and a gracious personality. To her constant care and companionship her husband owed much. She accompanied him on his last journey to Turkey in 1940 and her death in April of that year was a blow from which he never recovered. That he should follow her soon was not all tragedy.

Ross was a man of great parts, and possessed a personality which made itself felt in any company in which he found himself. He had an exceptional facility for learning languages: indeed the number which he knew had become almost legendary. Several he spoke fluently and well. Possessed of great humour and wit, he was an admirable speaker, shining especially when he spoke impromptu, whether in English or a foreign tongue. He had a great kindliness of heart; if he was quick-tempered, his anger, unless aroused by continued

injustice or cruelty, was soon past and left no rancour. His colleagues will long remember happy times when his wit sparkled and his nature expanded in congenial surroundings of the Common Room. He loved the good things of life and he loved to see others enjoying them. But beyond all his friends will remember him as one who was devoid of envy and whose greatest delight was to give a helping hand to others on the road to scholarship and learning, and who gained at least as much joy from their success as from his own. The School of Oriental and African Studies will be associated always with the name of Edward Denison Ross. For he was a great man.

R. L. T. -